



YASUSHI ICHIKAWA/CORNING MUSEUM OF GLASS

Inspired by Rain Clouds and Breaking Glass

The Japanese artist Rui Sasaki's great subject is the weather, and she uses phosphorescent materials to infuse her fragile pieces with mystery.

By TED LOOS

Artists and designers who work with ceramics and glass might be thought of as delicate types. After all, they specialize in works that can easily break.

But the converse tends to be true. It requires steady-handed bravery to blow glass or fire up a kiln, given the melting, explosions and shattering that are a normal part of the process.

Rui Sasaki fits this counterintuitive mold. She is soft-spoken but extremely dogged in her exploration of a tricky medium on a large scale, as with what is perhaps her best-known work, “Liquid Sunshine/I am a Pluviophile,” a commission for the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, N.Y., which was on long-term view until January and is now part of the museum’s collection.

It is made of more than 200 raindrop-shaped pieces of phosphorescent glass, and Ms. Sasaki spent about a year making it. She is working on a new version of the piece for the Toyama Glass Art Museum.

“Fragility and breaking glass is an inspiration for me,” Ms. Sasaki, 36, said from her home in Kanazawa, Japan. “Because glass is very fragile, but it’s really strong — much stronger than iron in some ways.”

Ms. Sasaki’s great subject is the weather, which, in the wrong hands, could be a banal

topic. She infuses it with mystery.

“It’s an important inspiration for me,” Ms. Sasaki said. “We never really get great sunshine in my area, and it’s the most rainy city in Japan. It’s always cloudy.” She was raised in a suburb of Tokyo, where it was much sunnier, she said.

Rather than create static objects to be looked at, Ms. Sasaki is also expert at activating her installations. In Corning, “Liquid Sunshine” was experienced by visitors in a darkened room, where the lights went off each time someone entered, courtesy of a motion detector.

The bits of phosphorescent material, which were being constantly charged, would glow, but then fade over time as people lingered in the space, “the way the memory of sunshine fades during the dark days of winter,” Ms. Sasaki wrote in her artist’s statement for the piece.

She used phosphorescent glass similarly in the 2015 work “Weather Chandelier,” which was attached to a solar panel. She has to special-order the phosphorescent material from China.

Susie Silbert, the Corning Museum curator who worked on “Liquid Sunshine,” said Ms. Sasaki’s preparations impressed her.

“Rui met with scientists to see how clear glass could work with phosphorescence,” Ms. Silbert said. “She really had to troubleshoot that. It was a lot of research. Not all glass shapes can hold it.”

Though Ms. Sasaki creates aesthetically pleasing objects, her work can have an edge of menace, too. Her 2010 installation “Walking on Glass” had visitors do just that, pulverizing glass panes into dust. For “Self-Container No. 2,” exhibited in 2015, she created a box of clear glass blocks, open on top, just barely large enough to fit her own body in a folded-up position.

Growing up, “I wanted to be an archaeologist or a surgeon,” Ms. Sasaki said. But in high school, she traveled with her father to Okinawa, a hub of craft activity in Japan, where she saw glass blown for the first time.

“I was like, ‘Oh, my God, this is glass,’” she said. “I was fascinated with it, so I switched my career goals.”

Ms. Sasaki rarely works with colored glass, preferring the clear version for her projects.

“I was really obsessed with swimming in the ocean and the pool” as a child, she said. “I always want to be in the water all the time, and I’m really interested in transparent material.”

After the Okinawa visit, she made a connection in her mind: “Water is glass. Glass is water.”

She went to her parents with the bad news. Ms. Sasaki recalled: “I told them, ‘I want to be an artist,’ and they were, like, ‘Oh, my God, you’re going to choose an unstable life?’ They were so surprised.”

Ms. Sasaki, who is a full-time faculty member at a local art school, Kanazawa Utatsuyama Kogei Kobo, got her Bachelor of Arts degree from Musashino Art University outside Tokyo in 2006. She then went to the Rhode Island School of Design for a Master of Fine Arts degree, perfecting her English along the way.

“R.I.S.D. was a culture shock for her,” said Jocelyne Prince, the head of the school’s glass department and one of Ms. Sasaki’s professors. “I almost failed her that first semester. But her tenacity eventually worked in her favor.”

Ms. Prince said that it took time for Ms. Sasaki to get used to an experimental approach — “working in a way that was more



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KANAZAWA MAKIYAMA GLASS WORKSHOP

Clockwise from top: Rui Sasaki’s “Liquid Sunshine/I am a Pluviophile,” a commission for the Corning Museum of Glass in New York; Ms. Sasaki at the Seto Ceramics and Glass Art Center in Japan; developing the “Liquid Sunshine” installation at the Kanazawa Makiyama Glass Workshop in Japan in 2018; plants sandwiched between sheets of glass fired in a kiln, part of a wall installation proposed for the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon; collecting plant samples.



HANMI MEYER/BULLSEYE PROJECTS



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about the question than the finished result” — but that her struggles were common for many graduate students.

“She found her groove, and then she was unstoppable,” Ms. Prince said. “Her work hasn’t lost its experimental nature. It’s become better while remaining fresh.”

Ms. Sasaki’s tenacity was useful when it was time to present “Liquid Sunshine” at the Corning Museum of Glass. Though she spent months planning it, she was at the museum for only three days at the very end of the installation process.

“She wanted to use a glossy paint on the floor, so the pieces could be reflective,” Ms. Silbert recalled. “But at that point we weren’t able to de-install the whole piece to do

that. So we came up with an alternative: We covered the floor in reflective Mylar.”

Instead of being thrown by a last-minute snag, Ms. Silbert added, “Rui hung tough about the look she wanted to achieve.”

Ms. Sasaki’s next project was scheduled to debut in September at the Portland Japanese Garden in Oregon, but it has been postponed because of the pandemic.

“It’s rainy there, so it’s perfect,” she said. Discussing Portland’s climate got her thinking about clouds generally and why she likes to try to depict them.

“A cloud you can’t touch or grab,” Ms. Sasaki said. “It’s a foggy shape, it’s temporary. I think it’s these ambiguous things that are interesting to me.”