

REVIEW STEVE KLEIN

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Considering the stylistic and chronological range of the works on display, as well as the exhibition title, Steve Klein's "From Chaos to Balance," at the Benaroya Glass Gallery, Museum of Northwest Art, may have been conceived as a mini-retrospective. Yet the small number of pieces, the modest scale of the gallery and awkward juxtapositions—from student-level and ordinary cast-glass objects to recent sculptural works of developed aesthetic and technical refinement—undermined the notion of a meaningful survey.

This was unfortunate but not fatal, for there is ample meaning in how Klein, a California artist with strong connections to the Pilchuck Glass School, developed his style over the past decade by following two concurrent modernist trends. He has pursued the sculptural, rather than the functional or decorative, augmenting his original métier, casting, with

fused (kiln-formed) and blown glass techniques. Stylistically, he has turned to the history of 20th-century geometrical and expressionist abstract painting. These modes converge in some of Klein's more recent pieces.

Translating the works of such painters as Piet Mondrian, Robert Motherwell and Kasimir Malevich into glass, especially at tabletop scale, is more a homage to modernist tradition than a personal statement. Nonetheless, the potential of glass from the vantage of surface field and deliberate mark making is evident in several untitled works from 1998 and 1999, in which colored glass rods are fused into a panel of thick glass to suggest hand-drawn marks or a mottled and layered mosaic effect. The circular or square boundaries "frame" the vertically mounted glass "painting."

Klein may have paid his respects to Mondrian et al., but the uncredited influence in his recent work seems—to this writer—to come from a different abstractionist milieu. A key work, which may also have been the turning point from vertically mounted panel pieces to balanced platform-mounted assemblages, is the fused glass triptych *Seeking Light: Red, Yellow, Blue*, 2002. Each 18-inch-square panel is nearly identical, and all are mounted in series in a suspended armature with industrial metal channels and cables. Using alternating clear and colored glass strips, or cane, Klein creates a vertical field of subtly wavering lines interrupted by a tilted internal square composed in the same fashion. The internal square is bounded by clear glass, so that it appears to hover in the striped field as if defying gravity. He does not cut the glass perfectly straight; the lines have an almost hand-drawn look. To me, the minimalist influence of Agnes Martin and Sol Lewitt is unmistakable, yet the work remains distinctive because of Klein's simple yet effective use of materials.

The stripe motif is continued in works such as *Lybster II*, 2005, and *Seeking Light: Panel with Nine Spheres*, 2002. The former is composed of short tubular segments fused and blown from the same striped matrix as the undulating platform on which the tubes are asymmetrically arranged and oriented. The latter, with blown spheres tilted and resting on a flat glass plate, is similarly constructed, but with a symmetrical arrangement and orientation. Here I sense the influence of such artists as Nancy Holt or Eva Hesse and, again, the works hold their ground aesthetically and technically. Especially well-rendered is the cross section visible on the edges of the fused plate. The flow of softened glass produces a kind of zipper effect as the adjacent clear or colored glass canes lock together in a serial manner rather than as separated elements.

Klein goes a bit further down the minimalist path with *Deconstruct/Construct*, 2005, a grouping of small geometric objects—either whole or truncated—of fused and blown glass arranged in grid fashion on a low black pedestal. Some internal logic is at work here. The piece does not lend itself to purely visual appeal but instead asks us to consider each element as an independent object seen in relation to another independent object.

In the end, it may be that Klein was taking the opportunity to showcase some works that were made in the service of an idea. His 2004 solo exhibit in Portland, at the Bullseye Connection Gallery, featured numerous pieces in which the abstractionist designs were combined with the striped minimalist objects in asymmetrically balanced arrays. Several examples of that type in the La Conner exhibit may have the technical rigor which has become a hallmark of Steve Klein's glass, but less of the clarity and logic that the symmetrically ordered pieces convey.

—RON GLOWEN

Ron Glowen is an independent art critic and artist based in Seattle.

TOP AND BOTTOM: *Seeking Light: Red, Yellow, Blue*, 2002, kiln-formed glass, 18 by 60 by 1/2 inches, photo/Maggie Soloday; *Lybster II*, 2005, kiln-formed and blown glass, 19 by 19 by 6 inches, photo/Jason Van Fleet. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Seeking Light: Panel with Nine Spheres*, 2002, kiln-formed and blown glass, 18 by 18 1/2 by 5 inches, photo/Jason Van Fleet.

