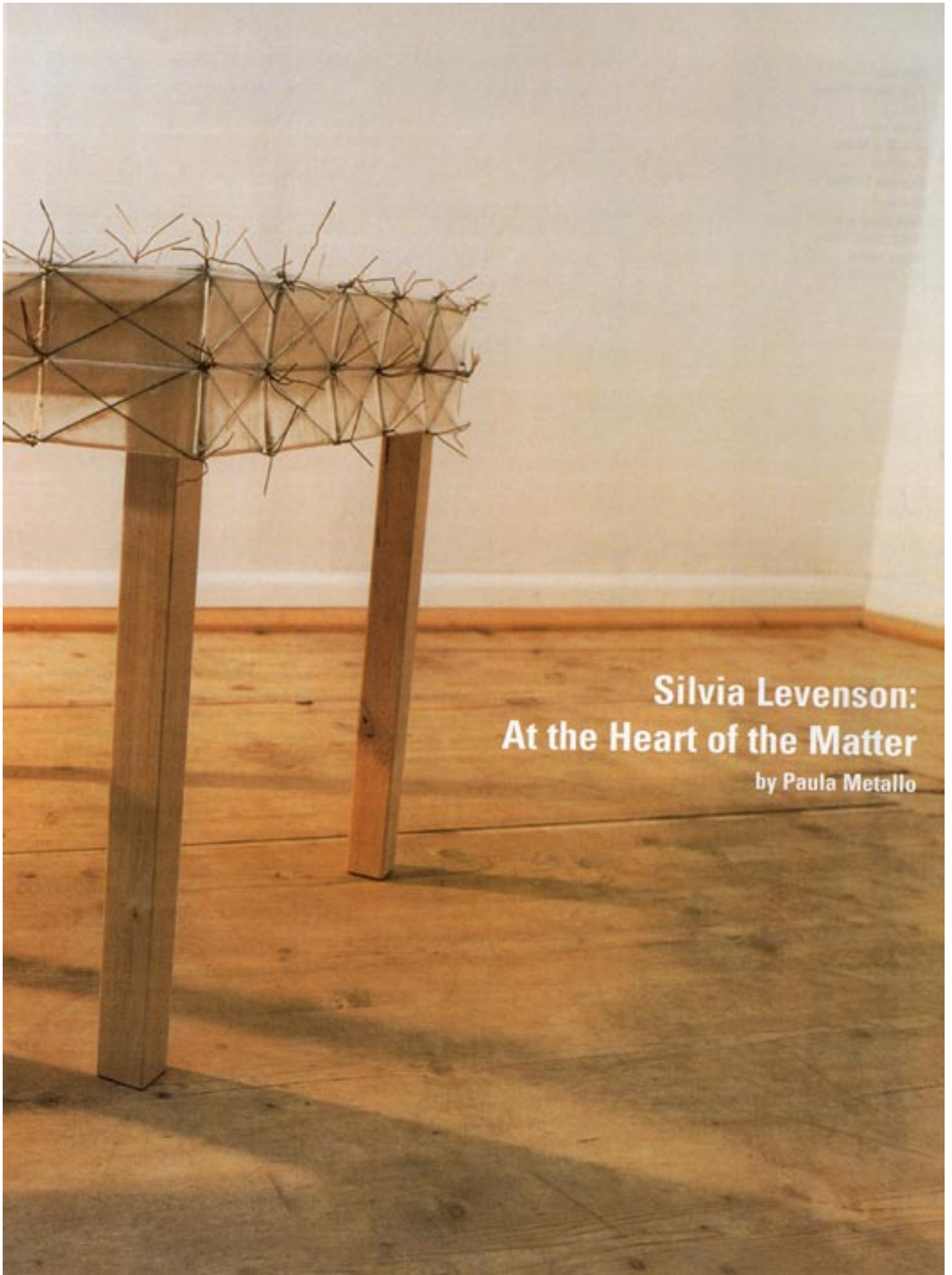




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**Silvia Levenson:
At the Heart of the Matter**
by Paula Metallo

Previous:
Seat Down, Please,
2001.

Glass, wood.
80 x 80 x 50 cm.

Courtesy
Caterina Tognon

Overleaf:
*Everything Is In
Order, Dear,* 1999.
Glass, wood.
80 x 80 x 100 cm.

At the heart of Silvia Levenson's art lies the description of the memories of childhood. The episodes in childhood that Silvia focuses on are the tiny tortures (like wool sweaters), the narrating of universal domestic tensions, and the drawing of dangers underlying the most commonplace of our daily activities. She allows herself to be touched by daily life as well as her past; a past that includes something as terrible in Argentina as dictatorship that solemnly jeopardized and annihilated the destinies of her old and new family, her generation, and entire country. Silvia man-

ages to convert the personal to universal-ity and tone it down. Yet she dares to work with a medium that can't be touched with bare hands. She does not accept the physical distance from the medium that is required of glass artists, she works around that, too. And many times the outcome is a conceptually tight, visually intriguing piece of contemporary art. While clarifying these fundamental contents, this interview took a turn to an interesting and insightful place where the defining of glass and its innate qualities became the key to the artist's choice of glass as medium.

Paula Metallo: The realization that we as parents are incapable of keeping our children safe is a pretty contemporary preoccupation. Would you agree that it's inevitable that as children we are constricted by family and society in some ways?

Silvia Levenson: When we are little and we live our daily "little person's" life we don't have that awareness of being pure and good and all those other things that we as adults add as values. Adults are always remarking how great it was to be

children and live a life filled with purity. But I think, as a child, we have more or less the same apprehensions, discomforts, and privations as adults. It's just related to a specific age. There are some children who are mean and creepy and make others suffer. Many times a child may have strong feelings of inadequacy in regards to his friends and family. Then when we grow up, in order to survive, we hold on to the idea that there was a time when we were absolutely happy. So we project this sense of purity and the idea of the golden years, that exists only in our minds, onto children. This is nothing new. It's what psychoanalysis is all about. The scars that accompany us throughout life. But I'm an optimist at heart. This life is hard but fundamentally we are all survivors. We all survive our personal shipwrecks. I believe we are strong and life is grand.

PM: People looking at your work often think, "Oh God, this artist has problems with her childhood!"

SL: All things considered, I have two lovely children and I love my Mom. It's easier to think that it's the artist's prob-

lem. Open the newspapers, I don't have a bad relationship with my childhood, society does. There's fear of suffering in our society. The fact that I am Argentinian, and have lived through determinant episodes and suffered precarious and unsafe situations, has given me a sense of how unsafe life can become. It led me to realize that I am contemporary with artists of my time but I am more contemporary with millions of people who suffer in the world and have absolutely no voice. Once we become aware and acknowledge the fact that people suffer, apparently nothing changes. We all go about our regular lives. Instead, in my opinion, as an artist you change internally because you know that you don't have to rush to get who knows where, to sell, and to make your art in a certain way.

PM: There is a positiveness about you and your work. I think your healthy way of looking at the artworld is what fosters your positive outlook.

SL: In fact, I don't live this experience like many artists I know. It's a very competitive world and many artists start out

critical and become monotonous, tedious, and unvarying. That which interests me is the reaction people have to my work. I make something that is born from my memory and my own recollections and yet it touches someone else in a very personal way. It is this mystery around art that always amazes me.

PM: It is said that there is "something" in art objects that is beyond price. Do you think there are artistic objects that, because they lack that "something", have a pricey look?

SL: Well, in my opinion, this has to do with the difference between value and price. Something that has a fancy price isn't necessarily valuable. Unfortunately, in the artworld value is very subjective. Therefore many times we sell and/or buy objects that have a preciousness that has been added on. And this added value is relative. The art market is filled with objects, sculptures, glass, that in my opinion has absolutely no value from an artistic standpoint. And this plays its part in the mystery of the art market. I think glass is a material that has incredible potential and it's a shame that the greater

part of the glass market is run by galleries, curators and collectors who always recommend and propose the "beautiful" object.

PM: Is the "beautiful" object one that doesn't inherently have that priceless "something"? To define what is the difference between these two things or distinguish which objects are which type without risking to sound like lawyers of merit is very difficult. But in my opinion the contemporary requisite to define and redefine glass art is a reality that makes the world of glass compelling and interesting. There is, in fact, something that holds glass back from its remarkable possibilities.

SL: Let's take for example something important for glass that is done at Pilchuck in the United States. Established artists that don't normally work with glass are invited and offered the experience. Through contemporary art practices they work on pieces that are already a part of an artistic discourse or research. And they elaborate them in glass. This is the kind of initiative that taps into the potential that glass offers.



PM: But... In a way one is forcing an artist that doesn't usually use glass to use it. Of course I understand your point but it seems like going in the back door to reach one's objectives.

SL: Yes, but by doing this you are presenting glass for what it is: one of the many mediums an artist can choose to work with. And not the only one. Artists that are not used to working with glass have a very different view of glass, and this vision is exactly what glass art needs.

PM: There is something curious I have come across in regards to artists who exclusively use glass and it is that they tend not to be interested in the work of other kinds of artists or contemporary art in other mediums.

SL: They only have eyes for glass. I was hanging around with a glass artist friend one day and suggested we go to an opening that evening. She asked if there was glass in the show and when I told her no she said, "Frankly I'm not interested!" This is the level of closed-mindedness we are talking about.

PM: What is it? There must be some property essential to this material that

conditions it.

SL: It's the technical difficulty. Let me put it in this way. The risks that glass runs as matter, the unchangeable, and disadvantageous elements intrinsic to glass, are two: First there are technical difficulties that glass has to begin with. You have to know how to manipulate it. And the second problem is that glass is full of beauty. It's too beautiful. It has this irresistible effect on people. Anything anyone makes out of glass people like.

PM: Why? Is it because people marvel at the effort involved in manipulating material that one minute is liquid and hot and the next hard and cold?

SL: I think it's the transparency. Think about how the American Indians reacted when they first saw glass beads. They're shiny and seductive. Glass has an intense relationship with light. This component presents a predicament for any artist using glass.

PM: Perhaps silver in jewelry, like glass, has this tendency to slide into the decorative and flamboyant.

SL: If you are realizing objects in glass you usually go to Murano to get your

objects produced as many artists do in Italy. At the very least you must acknowledge and accept that technically there are approaches you cannot take, procedures that you personally are not able to do, and some ideas that are actually impossible to render. Because of these contingencies you have to work out and devise an idea in decisive ways. Consequentially, the fact that there is so much technique involved means that there is also a lot of space and a high place given to virtuosity.

PM: The more complex technically a piece is the better it is?

SL: This is what I believe ruins glass. This idea. The aspect of virtuosity inevitably follows glass throughout the whole history of the medium. If you go to glass fairs the prerogative is to dazzle and charm you into buying. Glass is a costly medium, too. Do you know there are collectors that collect contemporary art that also collect glass, but they don't use the same criteria for choosing in both sectors. For example with a painting they won't stop and think.....

Hmmm, how much time and technique

did the artist put into this? Logically, technique influences but it doesn't always matter the most. It also depends on what the piece of art is trying to say. With glass art technical savvy is the deciding factor.

PM: Perhaps glass collectors are more conservative when it comes to glass. I mean conservative in the sense of protectors or guardians (of traditional technical canons).

SL: I don't think anyone, at this point in the history of glass, would really disagree that technique should be respected. But think about what happened to painting in and after the Renaissance in Europe. *La buona fattura* (the well made) was the most important prerequisite for calling a painting "art." There were many many skillful painters at the time but it was also very clearly agreed upon that a Raffaello or a Piero Della Francesca, for example, expressed and transmitted a spiritual and conceptual profoundness that was something beyond skill.

PM: In fact painting later arrived at such a saturation of the *buona fattura* that it became void of any meaning and this is what I believe brought us to the beginning of true artistic evolution in painting. It led us to expressionism, impressionism, cubism up until today where *la buona fattura* takes on many shades of meaning and definition. I think a lot of glass art that wants to be called contemporary is way behind in this coming out from under skill saturation.

SL: I think Peter Voulkos is a good example, especially for glass people. In the '50s and '60s he single-handedly brought ceramics into the world of contemporary art. He is the De Kooning of the ceramics movement.

PM: ... Yet he wasn't just making one-of-a-kind blobs like most of the American glass students of that time were. I saw him pull a pot on a wheel in a demonstration at U.C. Berkeley and the thing was five feet tall when he was finished. He was pushing and pulling incredible amounts of clay, exquisitely. He could do things big that others had trouble doing small. In this technical way he is the Tagliapietro of ceramics.

SL: Many times masterpieces happen without the artist being aware of why. At other times things are made in such a way that the object implores us to ask,

"Why wasn't this done in wood or plastic?" In the end what is important is not to lose track of events, relationships, and circumstances that condition us and the finished product that is our art. What really interests me is the developing of these contingencies through an experimentation with process.

PM: What place does practical ability have in your work?

SL: I could never make a drawing and then delegate someone else to realize it because my work takes form and body a little bit at a time as I do it. And when the work is in the doing stage, which is a stage I like a lot, it's there that I am concentrated on the piece and fall upon new ideas. This could mean approaching a new medium or resolving some technical question in another way.

PM: So then this is exactly how you first introduced glass into your work?

SL: Precisely.

PM: There are artists that are able to make a drawing and then say, this is just what I want. Your drawings have a very personal look to them, like taking notes. Your notes are about possible materials, dimensions, or colors that may be used.

SL: After beginning my hands-on stage it could be that I find out one thing works better than another and the new influence gets added onto the "drawing." They are also a work in progress.

PM: These could just as well be only words. Your drawings are also open-ended. These are very different from drawings or specific projectual plans that one would have to bring to a *maestro* glassblower.

SL: I personally want to be as free as possible from depending on others. Every artist must make a choice as to how much technicality is warranted in a piece. It's not easy to utilize the minimum possible technical aspects and still succeed in getting across the concept simply and clearly. This aspect, this non-dependency on the technical aspects of glass saves me from that danger we spoke of before. I don't run the risk of over impregnating the piece with beauty. The response I want is not one of astonishment. I do not want me or the work to be separate or above the viewer. I want the viewer to see themselves in the work.

PM: Let's go a little deeper into why you

chose glass. We talked about how glass as a material has strong meanings attached to it. What are some of these meanings and how do these fit into your work?

SL: I'm interested in glass because it is a domestic material. We find it in our homes, in the windows and doors. It isolates and protects us. So it's a familiar material. Yet deep in our subconscious we know, because as children we were constantly reminded, that it's fragile, that it can break and that it can hurt us. Just like all things in our daily life that could become weapons. And like the people in our daily life that one day could become strangers, or dangerous enemies. Glass easily lends itself to these concepts because of what it is.

PM: Now we're getting to the nitty-gritty. What IS it in the essence of glass that allows you to render your ideas about life? What is it that makes it a suitable artistic solution? Give me an adjective.

SL: Well then, ambiguous. The stratification of meaning. Barbed wire and razors, as objects, literally read dangerous. It's unilateral. The ambiguity that lies in glass allows it to be bilateral. It's fragile yet dangerous. You can see into it, but not see into it. It can be self-contradictory. Glass offers itself to punning and irony.

PM: There seems to be a responsibility towards the technical-manual aspects of glass, when talking or writing about a glass object. There is a sort of standard operating procedure in which one must repeatedly utilize words that have been established as descriptive of glass, like color, light, reflection and fluidity. Overall, these are words that specifically deal with a literal description and it could be because an inferential description doesn't fit into a promotional or publicity mode. In this conversation about your artwork we spoke about glass with a more integrated and unorthodox interpretation because we viewed it as stuff that was chosen from a lot of other stuff. In your case a choice based on a lifetime of attention payed to human interactions.

Paola Metallo is an artist living in Italy who is the Italian Correspondent for GLASS.

Plaza De Mayo,
2001.
Photo, glass.
130 x 130 cm.

