

**Silvia Levenson: Through the Kiln Darkly
and Jessica Loughlin: Seeing Farther**

By Richard Speer



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A.
Silvia Levenson
The Pursuit of Happiness, 2009
kilncast glass and metal
17.75 x 13.75 x 4.375 installed
photo: Endos.it



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The popular conception of the “Italian glass artist” is apt to summon visions of the broad-shouldered Veneziano, all blowpipe and bulging biceps, spinning out some souvenir chalice or sea horse to the applause of rapt turisti. It is all the more unexpected, therefore, that one of the premier glass artists working in Italy today is not a man, but a woman; not Venetian, but Argentinian-born from Russian-Jewish stock; and, perhaps most surprisingly, not a blower of goblets, but a kilncaster who uses (gasp) American-made glass to create socio-politically complex, autobiographically revealing sculptures and installations. As it turns out, everything about the artist Silvia Levenson is counterintuitive, most of all her work itself, whose cool, ironical detachment belies origins in a life filled with political upheaval, activism, flight, and aesthetic flowering.

Levenson, who now lives in the north of Italy, was born in Buenos Aires. During her teens in the 1970s, she began making art and became politically active against the oppressive regime of military dictator Jorge Rafael Videla. Under Videla’s so-called Guerra Sucia (“Dirty War”), tens of thousands of Argentines were kidnapped and killed for alleged dissent and Communist sympathies. During the purging, Levenson’s sister was briefly imprisoned, and several of her other family members were persecuted to varying degrees, including two of her cousins and her uncle, who was a newspaper publisher. During these uncertain times she joined grassroots efforts by the Trotskyist Party, which opposed Videla, and began visiting factories to speak with workers and unionists in a bid to end government oppression and break down barriers between social classes. In this whirl of activism, at age 16, Levenson married, eventually mothering two children. Being a wife and mother did not stop her from earning a graphic design degree at Martin Garcia College and landing a job as a designer.

Her political activities, however, continued to arouse suspicion from the government, and following a close call in 1978, during which regime

operatives staked out her house, she and her family went into hiding for nearly three years. In 1981, they were able to flee Argentina for Italy, where Levenson’s husband had family, and she eventually attained dual Argentine-Italian citizenship. In her new life in Milan, she worked as a graphic designer but also drew and painted. It was not until 1987 that she showed her artwork publicly, in a group show in Milan. Fortuitously, a fellow artist in that show had recently returned from a glass workshop in Switzerland and lent Levenson a book on glass fusing. Later that year, she traveled to New York and took in an exhibition by Swedish glass artist Bertil Vallien, whom she greatly admired. Soon afterwards she rented a studio close to her home and began working in glass, in a style she now characterizes as “painterly but a little bit decorative—although in the moment, I thought they were masterpieces!” A 1992 meeting in Germany with Bullseye Gallery’s Lani McGregor led to her traveling to Portland, Oregon, to work with Bullseye glass, a material she uses exclusively to this day.

The confluence of working with Bullseye materials and returning to Buenos Aires in 1993 to visit family members, ultimately steered her work away from the decorative and toward more conceptual and autobiographical realms. In particular, a series of long talks with her uncle refocused her thoughts on the perils that had led her to flee her homeland more than a decade before. With these memories reawakened, she flew back to Italy and began incorporating a more political bent into her art. In 1994, when she mounted her first solo gallery show, the reception to the work was immediate and favorable. Many viewers, familiar with glass only through the Muranese blowing tradition, had never seen kilncast work before. More than a few of them asked Levenson if she had invented the technique. Looking back, the artist says she believes she happened into her art career at an opportune time, when the art and craft worlds were conspicuously straddling a divide between materiality and conceptualism. At the time she was—as she continues to be—interested in exploring themes for one- to two-year periods, developing her ideas exhaustively, then moving on to new, but related, topics.

Throughout her explorations she has remained fascinated by the ambiguity of glass: its familiarity among the accoutrements of daily life—mirrors, windows, spectacles, stemware—and simultaneously its sharpness and ability to harm. With an irony that manages to feel more empathetic than smug, she has built a style around an uncanny ability to suggest the danger in beautiful things

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Silvia Levenson in the studio
photo: M. del Commune

and the beauty in dangerous things. Certain representational objects have lent themselves well to this stratagem and become repeating motifs. In Levenson’s hands, weapons such as hand grenades, pistols, and knives are defused, unloaded, dulled, and grouped in seemingly benign shadowbox displays, their sinister qualities muted by matte surfaces and pretty pastels. With its quartet of pink grenades in a Depression Glass-style fruit bowl, the piece *Something Wrong*, in the collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art, illustrates the artist’s knack for counterposing banality and treacherousness. She deploys other objects, such as perfume bottles, makeup containers, children’s toys, dresses, and furniture, to cast a skeptical eye on phenomena including romantic love, domestic life, self-help books, and antidepressant drugs. Of this latter, Levenson believes that societies around the world have come to expect “a cosmetic of happiness, where we all have to look beautiful and happy and young... We have become allergic to pain and suffering. The tendency is to think, ‘I don’t like my nose; I will change it.’ ‘I feel bad because I lost somebody I love; I will take a Prozac.’ We believe that happiness is something we can put into our bodies, instead of something that happens when we really find ourselves.”

A restless intellect, she has in recent years added digital video to her repertoire of media. In short films such as *Everything is Okay*, she sets up scenarios of immaculate homely bliss, only to pull the rug out from under her players as they grapple with life’s chaos via the crutches of alcohol, pharmaceuticals, and New-Age meditation. “My experience as a small girl,” she remembers, “was that my father and mother loved my sister and myself, but I never felt protected by them. So my life was about the lack of protection.” In her art, then, the family unit’s inability to offer failsafe shelter lies at the root of a mistrust of power structures and social institutions. Fair is foul, and foul just might be fair, her work hints. Stasis, equipoise, and even beauty are suspect, for they may harbor seeds of corruption.

These cautions notwithstanding, Levenson still clings to the utopianism of her revolutionary past: “In the 1970s, the young people in Argentina had the expectation that we would change the country—not in the future but right away, tomorrow morning! You can almost touch this feeling in all the people in my generation, even all these years after.” This feeling, she concludes, “modified completely my vision of life and the way I do my art, because it made me realize, no matter what happens, I am a survivor.”