

Glass City:

April Surgent's Fused and Cameo Engraved Panels

By Shawn Waggoner



"Accepting Your Bridge," April Surgent, fused and cameo-engraved glass, 25 x 14.5 x .50 inches installed, 2006. PHOTO: R. Watson. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery.

A viewer can look into a black and white photograph and be transported not only to a particular place, but to the emotional world of what it feels like to *be* in that particular place. Like a photograph, April Surgent's cityscapes pack the same powerful punch, but with the added elements of dimension and texture. Her fused and cameo engraved glass panels put a grittier, modern spin on the ancient techniques used to create them.

"My work investigates the importance of the inherent link between person and place. Places have the power to shape people's perceptions of themselves and others, and to affect what and how we think, feel, see, remember and act. Place has this power because everything we do happens in and is influenced by our surroundings. Having a natural bond to places we are often understood and understand ourselves through them," says Surgent. "Parallel to the power of place over human identity is the power of one's own perspective over place. We see and understand life through accumulated experiences, personal beliefs and gained knowledge. My work expresses personal narratives, intended to raise questions about ways of seeing, and to remind us there are many factors that alter the things we look at and experience."

Surgent's background includes glassblowing assistantships in Denmark at age 16 and in Seattle at age 19. She earned her BFA at The Australian National University, Canberra, with honors, in 2004.

Two years later, the Bullseye Gallery, Portland, Oregon, presented Surgent's first solo exhibition, "A Meandering Tale," July 1 – 29. This body of work chronicled her recent postgraduate European journey and also explored how the power of place and Surgent's perspective has distorted her experiences of and with different surroundings.

"Surgent's single-mindedness of purpose and her relentless dedication to her work has long been its own driving force. From a young age her interest in art – and glass in particular – set her on a circuitous but determined journey," writes Lani McGregor, Executive Director, The Bullseye Gallery, in the show catalog.

The artist's decision to focus on cameo engraving was unusual and made her work stand out among her contemporaries. Tina Oldknow, Curator of Modern Glass at the Corning Museum, selected Surgent's work as "Juror's Choice" in this year's "New Glass Review," a publication intended to showcase cutting-edge works of glass art.

In February 2007, Surgent's work will travel with Bullseye to the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, to participate in a show called COLLECT. One of her pieces is also featured in Bullseye's touring exhibition, "Contemporary Kiln-Glass," on exhibit at the University of Miami from January 11 through February 22, 2007.

In the following conversation with "Glass Art" magazine, Surgent discusses her budding career and the work that grabbed the attention of both McGregor and Oldknow.



April Surgent working. PHOTO: J. Hart. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery.

GA: How did someone born in Missoula, Montana, find herself going to art school in Australia and traveling around Europe to make critically acclaimed glass art? (I know that's a big question.)

AS: I was born in Montana, but I actually grew up in Kenmore, Washington, about 30 minutes north of Seattle. My parents are finish carpenters running their own millwork installation business, so I've been around craft my entire life.

At age 14, I traveled to Vancouver, Canada, with my mom, and there I saw people blowing glass for the first time. Like many people before me, I was immediately seduced by the material. For my next birthday, I asked my parents to pay for glassblowing classes at an open access studio in Seattle. Once I started blowing glass, I knew that I'd be hooked for a long while. During my senior year of high school, I started talking to local glass artists about education in glass. I was encouraged to go to art school, and at the last minute applied to schools all over the States and at the Canberra School of Art, Australia. I received a full scholarship to the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, but after one year, for a want to travel, I transferred to Canberra.



"I Thought I Saw You There," April Sargent, fused and cameo-engraved glass, 19 x 34 x 2 inches installed, 2005. PHOTO: R. Watson. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery.



"Flight Away From You," April Sargent, fused and cameo-engraved glass, 33 x 35 x 2 inches installed, 2006. PHOTO: R. Watson. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery.

GA: Describe your experience at Canberra School of Art.

AS: I'm a traditionalist when it comes to working with materials. Learning how to use a material to convey ideas along with a high level of craftsmanship are important things to me. Having a balance between the two was my goal, and studying at Canberra provided a good program for me based on those objectives. The staff encouraged having strong conceptual basis behind well-made pieces of art. There, students learn to blow glass, cast, kiln work, cold work – everything I was interested in.

Jane Bruce was there my first three years, and then Richard Whiteley took over for the last year of my studies. The workshop experienced many changes while I was there as Steven Procter had just passed away. But the strong community amongst the staff, students and the rest of the art school was phenomenal.

Because my work is about place and human interaction with place, I absolutely loved living in Australia. Being out of my home country made me focus on the issues to which my work speaks. I learned a great deal about myself, and what it is for me to be American. It was a hard decision to leave Australia and return to the US. I miss it a lot. The glass community there is a lot smaller, but very strong because of that.

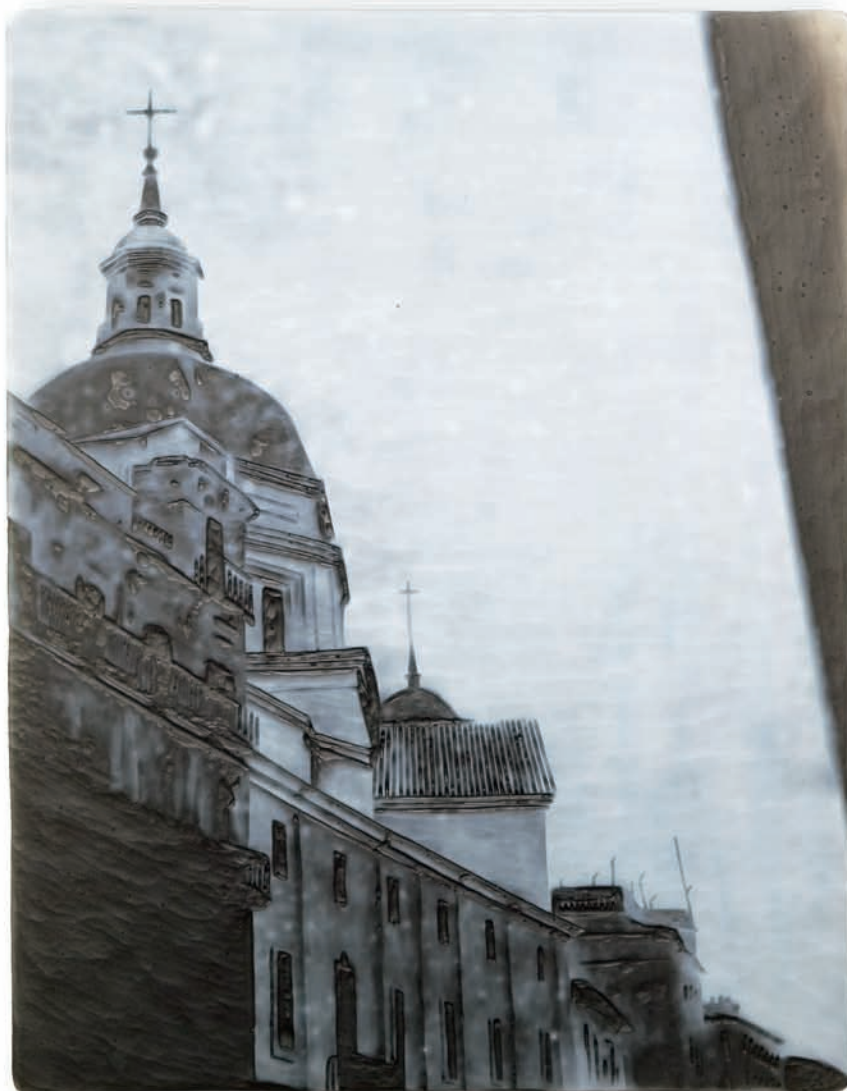
GA: How did your career evolve and blossom upon your return to the States?

AS: Lani McGregor, the Executive Director of the Bullseye Gallery, had bought a piece of mine from the student show at the Seattle Glass Art Society (GAS) conference in 2003, starting my relationship with Bullseye. When I graduated from university, the Bullseye Gallery asked if I wanted to participate in SOFA Chicago 2005. Because I was moving back to the States, I didn't have anywhere to make new work. It was then that I was offered a five-week residency at the Bullseye Glass Company. While there, I continued cutting figurative images into glass panels and focused on pushing the work compositionally. It was an amazing experience being in the factory where the glass is made. I was provided with accommodation, a car, and all of the materials and technical assistance they could provide. I feel very privileged to have been a part of their residency program. Going straight into a residency from school was a huge help in making it possible for me to continue making work after graduation.

GA: Was your residency responsible for Bullseye offering you your first solo exhibition, "A Meandering Tale," presented at the gallery in Portland this past July?

AS: When I graduated, I was presented with a monetary reward from the Spanish Embassy in Canberra. They acquired one piece that went into their permanent collection, and with the reward, I was encouraged to travel Spain in search of inspiration to make new work when I returned. Lani and I had discussed the possibility of a group show, but the scholarship allowed us to consider a solo show.

After four months of travel, I returned home and had about six months to make a body of work. This was pretty intimidating as I was working by myself in a makeshift studio in my parents' wood-working shop. Going from a school environment to a personal studio provided a very different working space and was quite daunting. But I feel that the show was received well, and I am happy with how it turned out.



"A Miscommunication Between There and Here," April Surgent, fused and cameo-engraved glass, 24.5 x 13 x 2 inches installed, 2006. PHOTO: R. Watson. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery.



"Our Abstruse Connection," April Surgent, fused and cameo-engraved glass, 21 x 19 x 2 inches installed, 2006. PHOTO: R. Watson. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery

GA: Describe your process and how you achieve what appears as a photographic image in glass.

AS: I start off by taking all my own photographs. Once I've selected an image, I enlarge it to the size that I will make it into glass. Next, I select the glass, usually three colors, and fuse them together into one panel. I've been experimenting with different color combinations, but usually I work with white on top and two colors underneath. Basically I'm making my own flashed glass. Once the panel is fused, I then trace the basic outline of my image, using the paper copy as a pattern, onto the glass. Using a cutting lathe, I remove large areas of

glass, and then I use an engraving lathe to do the detail work. Once the engraving is complete, the panel goes back into the kiln to be fire polished.

GA: What goes into the selection of a place you want to feature in one of your pieces?

AS: My work is a conglomerate of experiences. I try to choose a subject matter based upon something I know or feel about a place. I use the photograph less for what the lens sees and more to capture figurative images that contain strong emotional qualities. When I begin a piece, I seek out evocative images that are also autobiographical.

For all the work that I did for the solo show and the



"But You Won't Look Back," April Surgent, fused and cameo-engraved glass, 17 x 33.5 x 2 inches installed, 2006. PHOTO: R. Watson. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery.



"More Than You," April Surgent, fused and cameo-engraved glass, 18 x 18 x 2 inches, 2006. PHOTO: R. Watson. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery.

work I'm making now, I'm trying to represent people and places the way I've experienced them, expressing moments from contemporary life with no definitive beginning or ending. When people look at the images in the work, hopefully they're able to make and connect their own stories to them.

GA: In your work, I was surprised by how much emotion a landscape or cityscape could evoke. It's a quiet approach to content, yet powerful.

AS: Some works are more successful than others, but that is something that I try to get across. The images I work from carry a lot of emotion for me, and I try to convey that through the cutting. It's important when people see the work, that they can pick up on my story, but make their own story as well. The titles of my works are important in that they convey my piece of this relationship; they hint at what the work means to me.

GA: What have been the major obstacles you've overcome in terms of the process and the aesthetic development of the work? Was it difficult to develop a format that would support your ideas?

AS: Yes. When I started out in glass, I was blowing, and I found myself frustrated with the material because I felt the technique was not allowing me to express my ideas. I was drawing a great deal and couldn't figure out how to get those ideas into glass. In 2003, I attended a Jiri Hrcuba workshop at Pilchuck where I



"Defying your Omnipresence," April Surgent, fused and cameo-engraved glass, 23 x 30 x 2 inches, 2006. PHOTO: R. Watson. Courtesy of the Bullseye Gallery.

really discovered the possibilities of engraving. Harcuba was cutting portraits into glass, and it was then that I realized that engraving could be a method for taking my ideas off of paper and onto glass.

Currently, the biggest challenge in creating this work is figuring out what I'm going to cut — finding the imagery and putting it together, with the goal of telling new and interesting stories. A lot of early work combined two or more different images, which can be tricky compositionally. Currently I'm working with one image, and that creates other issues of how the story or image reads and where the focal point should be.

GA: Besides Harcuba, who or what are some of your other influences?

AS: American Realist painters, Hopper and Burchfield, Utah based painter Brian Kershnik. I also find inspiration in the quiet works of glass sculptor, Christopher Wilmarth.

GA: You're taking a short break from your emerging artist in residence program at Pilchuck to talk with "Glass Art" about your work. What aesthetic and technical goals do you have for the work at this point? Are you using your Pilchuck residency to investigate new horizons?

AS: I was selected for the residency along with six other artists. We're here with a tech, and we have full access to the cold shop, mold room and kilns. We get to

run around Pilchuck and make our own work for eight weeks. It's been an amazing experience.

When I was overseas, I discovered and appreciated traditional portraiture and still lives in the flesh. I'm exploring those ideas in my own work and cutting frames into the glass. I'm trying to keep the work moving forward, with a focus on imagery and composition. Another major interest I have is working on an architectural scale in order to make work that reaches a larger audience and not only speaks of place, but creates a space. Right now, I'm taking the glass to the tool. And if I could take the tool to the glass, that would allow me to create bigger pieces.

GA: You graduated in 2004 and in the short two years since then, your career has continued to evolve, and you have prospered as a glass artist. Do you have any advice for other young artists?

AS: Having the support of my family and friends and Bullseye has been huge for me. At the moment, I'm working out of a corner of my parents' workshop. Aside from some equipment, not having many studio costs during this early stage of my career has helped to sustain it. I am, however, in the process of setting up a studio with friend and fellow artist, Ethan Stern, in Seattle. Continually thinking about and making work whether it is a rough drawing or finished piece has been imperative to the growth of my work post university. ♦