

IN THE BALANCE

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Relatively few new forms of art were invented in the Twentieth Century. One of great significance, though, has been the century-long interest in found objects and their amendment and re-presentation. From Marcel Duchamp to the Surrealists, from Joseph Cornell to Robert Rauschenberg, from Meret Oppenheim to Donald Lipski, and from many many more there has been something particularly alluring about the discovery of something in the 'real' world, some object with its own dormant presence and mute history that can be somehow rehabilitated, resuscitated, and returned to the realm of the interesting by the imposition of an artist's hand and imagination. Mary Shaffer is a lot of things, and, like some of the artists mentioned above, her interests extend in other directions as well. But the exercises in looking that comprise her recent sculpture is surely centered in her sensitive scavenging, in her ability to take what is seemingly beneath notice and release from it new realms of suggestion and meaning.

Tools are extensions of our bodies, implements designed to make our motion more efficient, more capable of performing specialized tasks. They are used and cast away, often broken and redundant, endless bits of metal rusting away forgotten, non- and dysfunctional. Had any particular use for several-foot-tall ice tongs lately? Shaffer's crystalline resurrection of such a thing works on several levels. First, there is the sense of homage to the anonymous craftsman who originally designed such a stupendously logical and surprisingly lovely thing. The tongs exhibit the lean and efficient design that Shaffer is always drawn towards, and her recovery of this draws us seamlessly back through time to a world when blocks of ice were trudging about. Her recognition of it as some pelvic metaphor for the body of a woman is so simply and stunningly revelatory as to deserve to be called profound. Shaffer, of course, does not simply re-present this object; she has it interact with a slab of slumped glass that everywhere extends and intensifies her observations. The sheer weight of the glass brings back the sense of labor, its downward collapse a memory of melting ice, its curved top a completion of the oval of the tongs and the whole providing a kind of skirt for the entire assemblage. This working with, rather than upon, her source materials is at the center of Shaffer's craft, this generous merging of elements into a reconciliation that often appears inevitable and natural.

Metal tools, like glass, are the products of the forge, and while now cool to the touch, bear vestigial memories of the cauldron from whence they came. In a piece like *Cranked*, Shaffer plays with that relationship a bit, suggesting that perhaps a long (and very handsome) spike might have collapsed its shape when some molten glass was layered atop it. Her taffy-like glass, cascading downward, seemingly groaning under its own weight, is as direct a statement of the ambiguities of glass (hot/cold, soft/hard, familiar/strange, clear/opaque, etc.) as can be imagined. In *Brushed*, an old and many toothed implement, probably employed in the scouring of pipes of unimaginable function, seems to have been dipped into a pot of scalding glass. Again, Shaffer plays at the edges--this is, after all, a brush, and brushes are dipped into things like paint. But glass isn't paint (or is it?), and the congealed thing that results is propped on a pedestal, a poignant monument to dysfunction. It's like a rust-zone version of putting fur all over a teacup. At their best, Mary Shaffer's recent sculptures have a bit of the great wonder of Meret Oppenheim's 1936 *Luncheon in Fur*. To render useless while revealing deeper function, to alter in order to expose, to allow us to look, really look, to cause a reconsideration and a rethinking of

that which always surrounds us everywhere, everyday--that might just include the best of what art can offer.

James Yood: New Art Examiner Review: Mary Shaffer

In Mary Shaffer's hands, glass does more or less the same work that dreams do. It slips around ordinary objects and, fluid as wind and just as transparent (dreams of thicken into unreality only when they're over), utterly distorts the quotidian shape of things. Ice tongs. For instance, get suspended in midair, held there by a viscous pour of bottle-green glass. Curtseying, another pair of tongs is supported by a trailing skirt, and a third stands demurely upright, an apron of glass tucked neatly around its waist. Lest the viewer check such figurative associations, Shaffer identifies them herself in some cases. In running Man she hurls an amber wing of glass over the shoulder of a stiff-legged sprinter, evoked by a heavy wrench. In Lancelot, which Shaffer describes as a "helmeted crusader with a spirit inside instead of a man," clear glass surges through the visor vents of a medieval-looking helmet, its very colorfulness suggesting both probity and menace.

Shaffer pioneered slumped glass in the early seventies, which she used even then in association with found objects, but it is only one of a great many approaches she has taken to the medium. Having begun her career as a painter, she early on responded to the expressive appeal of glass and, not least, to its versatility. Working with every form of the material from fiber optics to monumental sheets of molten plate, she has fashioned intimate objects, narrative-driven room-sized installations, and fully abstract large-scale public commissions. Among some discernible constants are an interest in the way glass permutes the interactions of mass and light, and a belief that "art is a way of slowing down time." The tool sculptures go further, arresting the physical response of glass to gravity in mid-movement, and providing perceptual events of surpassing clarity.