

Mary Shaffer: Catching the Light

Marcia Miro, art critic living in Detroit, a contributing editor for *Art News*, *Glass Magazine*, among other publications.

Over a decade ago it was already possible to identify three characteristics that made Mary Shaffer's work innovative: her experimentation with process, creation of new forms, and marriage of process and form with meaning.*

Over the last 12 years Shaffer hasn't shifted from this innovator's stance, nor slowed down her production. She continues to develop earlier ideas. Her concepts remain overriding. Her material-plate glass-still leads her, allowing her to make unexpected forms out of chance and controlled occurrence of process.

Yet one must add to the initial ideas of meaning the Shaffer has anchored her glass sculptures contextually, always finding or making a connection between object and place, object and culture, object and science, as well as time. To every found or finished material she appropriates, she adds her context, shifting meaning so what was becomes something different, more highly evolved and revealing. Every sculpture she makes from scratch carries referents, relating to a variety of circumstances. Shaffer has a dogged way of never letting go of these contexts, sometimes repeating an idea over and over in different configurations and scales until she has explored it in every situation she can imagine. In fact, a strength of the work is the freshness her recontextualizing brings.

This is very clear in her tool sculptures. She made a few of them in 1972, then revisited the idea with a series she has worked on consistently since 1993. With the newest, on exhibition at Habatat Galleries recently, the tools are found objects-scissors, calipers, a hatchet, wrench and wheel-all rusty with the patina of age. Some of the tools are dipped in hot glass accreting feet of puddled clear glass. Others are cast with glass parts, or combined with slumped plate glass. The glass acts as the support, setting the demeanor of the object by holding the tool in an upright position, this change of context gives it a lifelike quality, a physical posture. The holes in the Wrench in *The Scream* make it seem an abstract face like that in the famous Edvard Munch painting. Open scissor blades recall deer antlers and the majesty of the animal in *Sure Shooter*, a title that implies this piece is about hunting, expanding the circumstances of it. The calipers in *Arabesque*, look like a figure about to move, part of a dance, intimating change and fluid interaction with space. With most pieces the translucent or transparent glass fixes the tools in space so it appears suspended, unaffected by gravity's effects. The interdependence of the two parts-the historically male hand tool and the pliant, supportive glass-bring the context of what Shaffer calls the "female principle" to work.

According to Jungian interpretations this is "the idea of yielding and joining forces with nature, versus the 19th century attitude of man over nature." Shaffer says. By bringing male and female together, the now non-functional tool is given a new identity, as a sculptural evolution of our post-feminist culture. The tool pieces make other connections that are both personal and cultural. Shaffer furets out these tools, buying at flea markets, farm sales and from dealers who have saved them for her. That they are used and old is significant. "It's not just the process of renewal, but of preserving and paying tribute to activities and methods of working that are disappearing." She explains. Many generations back in her own family, her ancestors built a mill

where tools like these were discovered, so her connections to this tradition are deep. But the links go back even further. A tool, like a hatchet, is a primal form invented in prehistoric times when such objects were the means for survival. The tool was man's first invention, allowing him to conquer nature. Taken as a group-Shaffer has installed walls full of them-her sculptures narrate a kind of history of this culture of the hand tool. There are other ways she juxtaposes and unites these particular variables. When she began making sculpture in the 1970s, the minimalist metal works by Donald Judd, Richard Serra and others were extremely important. In their sculptures, elimination of the artist's hand and touch was critical, with the artist creating the idea and the fabricators making the form to the artist's specifications. Shaffer has worked since the early 1980s on another series of sculptures that reconfigure these minimalist forms. Columns and shelves, usually made for Shaffer in a metal shop, contain or support slumped masses of glass that appear to flow out of or off the geometric forms like water stopped midstream. Shaffer developed a process she calls "mid-air slumping," where rather than forming a piece in a mold, the plates glass is allowed to curl and shape itself as gravity, heats or whatever it is contiguous to, pulls it. She explains: "Because I work with gravity, the strongest unknown force in the universe, I say I work with nature."

With *Agua Fria* and *Agua Verde* of 2001, two shelves are hung one over the other, in the manner of Judd. The slumped glass on each shelf was formed by putting the hot glass on top and letting it fall naturally, preserving the action and reaction of the material to its location. While the metal is a solid, controlled geometric support, the glass is a clear, fluid, self-forming opposite, abstractly referring to industry versus nature. The relationship between materials is also critical to Shaffer, with metal providing the context for glass here and vice versa, intensifying the qualities of each because of the contrast.

Of all her concerns her fascination with light has been one of the most enduring. In fact she first began making glass sculpture in the early 1970s in order to capture the look of light coming through paned windows or the wavy surface of curtains. Some of the initial work consisted of slumped glass caught in grids of wire, conveying the appearance of undulating light. In her latest exploration of that phenomena, the *Light-Catcher* series, the sculpture is the context that makes this happen. Rather than an appearance she finds a way to actualize this effect of light. Each of the four recent sculptures consists of a sliver metal form attached to the wall and an irregularly slumped square panel of clear glass with an opening in the middle, the shape of the metal form, so the glass fits over the metal. The metal shape in *Sunrise* is an "x"; in *Positive*, a cross; in *Two-Lights*, two vertical, thin bars; in *On Center*, one vertical, thin bar. Among the references being made are those to a plus sign or to a religious symbol, a marker of place, an equal sign or upright form. For Shaffer, the two lines were like light coming through the spaces in a window shutter. These metal icons are also symbols of the building blocks of matter, from genetic codes. All the meanings amplify the icon's role as structure or core. Technically, they are the solid support on which the precarious glass panels balance, often on edge, away from the wall. Light is caught in the bowl of glass and moves through it, creating patterns on the wall. The metal centers are shiny so light bounces off, making them occasionally invisible. At regular six-inch intervals linear marks are made in the glass, as visual measuring devices laid over the changing light patterns, remnants of the mullions on a window. Fleeting, sifting light is the essence of these pieces. At times the physical matter almost disappears, leaving only the cast shadows as visible evidence of the artist's hand. "I like the essence of things," Shaffer explained. "That's way I don't use a lot of color."

Beyond referencing channeling light, the title *Light-Catcher* suggests practices of other cultures, like Native Americans who knew so much about it because of their closeness to nature. Shaffer

who lives in Marfa, Texas, and Taos, New Mexico, heed these voices and is in tune with natural forces. She loves being in Marfa because you can see the curvature of the earth across the vast open spaces. Intense light is a constant there. "Glass," she says, "is like holding light in your hand."

While Shaffer began each of the main strands of her art—the tools, the minimalist oriented sculptures and the light based pieces—years ago, they hold her as she pushes them forward. By putting them in the contexts that are relevant to the state of art, culture, and philosophy of the time, the work continues to ripen. The light catchers, for instance, are remarkably simple, yet complex. Shaffer couldn't have conceived them in the 1970s because circumstances were different. In 2001 they are the right solutions. She remains focused in her art, uniting opposites in sculpture that are curious and satisfying.

*See: John Perreault *MARY SHAFFER: A DISCOURSE ON INNOVATION*. New York, Spring 1989, New York City.