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Arts Focus: Filling Glass with Meaning  
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*In "Self-Portrait," Michael Janis separates a face from the world with glass that contains writing.*

It's a typical day at the Washington Glass School in Washington, D.C. WGS founder Tim Tate leans into an open kiln and presses a plastic locust into a narrow strip of plaster powder, making a clean indentation. This will act as a mold into which he will later melt plate glass, creating a cast so finely detailed that the pattern on the locust's wings will show. Nearby, co-director Michael Janis sits at a worktable, sprinkling crushed glass onto a clear surface, using it to paint a silhouette in graffito that will become one layer in a castglass work. Across the room, the third WGS partner, Erwin Timmers, crouches near a sculpture in progress, puzzling out the details of combining neon with salvaged metal and recycled glass.

This is a far cry from glory holes and other icons of the glass studio movement. Yet it is typical of what is happening across the country as more and more artists use glass to express an expanding range of content, often by combining techniques and materials.

Martha Drexler Lynn, author of *American Studio Glass 1960-1990* and, more recently, *Sculpture, Glass and American Museums*, notes that "Artists are not just doing straight glass. They're using glass as an expressive component in a larger whole, and that's great because at that point glass becomes just one more material in the arsenal."

This may sound like a demotion to some, but it is really a leap forward for glass. "It subjugates the medium to the artist's intent, which is exactly what should happen," says Lynn. In some ways, this is the latest chapter in a debate that has characterized the American studio glass movement since its inception: what should take precedence, technique or content?

Some artists have made careers of pushing the envelope and have filled many a gallery, home and museum with creations of mind-blowing beauty. Others, meanwhile, have focused on mastering technique in order to express the content they want to convey.

As early in the movement as 1972, studio glass icon Harvey Littleton took a stand. At a National Sculpture Conference in Kansas, Littleton famously declared that "technique is cheap." In his wake, the '80s saw a wave of content-laden work—sculptures by Howard Ben Tré, Mary Van Kline, Paul Stankard, Ginny Ruffner, William Morris, Therman Statom and others, who were, in turn, followed by the likes of Mark Petrovic, Jack Wax, Robert Carlson and Michael Rogers in the '90s.

"It's addictive to make the perfect vessel," Tate admits. "The trick is to overcome that." Janis calls this hardto-resist attraction "the quest for the

perfect bubble," and he, too, confesses he is not immune. But, like a growing number of artists, Tate and Janis subscribe to the motto their glass school hammers home to students: "Learn your craft, then move beyond it."

As though to prove this point, Tate curated a show, "Compelled By Content," which was shown last spring at the Fraser Gallery in Bethesda, Md. The show proved so successful that "Compelled By Content II," including works by Tate, Janis and other glass artists, will be on display until June 4, according to the gallery's Lennox Campello.

And if you eavesdrop on any number of workshops at WGS, you will notice that, while students and teachers work on technique, they spend at least as much time discussing how to translate concepts into three-dimensional works.

At the school they also argue over what exactly constitutes "content." In this they are not alone. "

All these words are slippery," Lynn says, by way of explaining why she defers to renowned art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss: "Content," Lynn says, paraphrasing Krauss, "is anything that relates to a basic human experience." In other words, content can range from narration to emotion, from personal reminiscence to political commentary, from plays on words to musings on faith, death and destiny. Even within a small sample of Washington artists, "content" varies widely.

For Tate, subjecting technique to content has brought forth a body of work that evokes healing, rebirth and memory. In his series of blowglass hearts, for example, "Repository" contains speckled eggs made of ceramic and pte de verre, while "Brood" features an etched cross proportioned like the American Red Cross logo and, inside, a collection of cicada husks.

The cross recurs in a cast piece in which a man's form emerges from a glass panel as if from underwater, his chest sporting a cross. Although Tate does not speak about it often, he lives with HIV, a threat he has responded to by celebrating life. Fittingly, the title of this panel is "Portrait of a Positive Man."

In Janis's works, issues of memory and identity loom large. In "Personal Dreamtime," furrows arc across a textured field, converging but not touching. One carries two Australian banksia seedpods—a nod to the 10 years Janis lived "Down Under"—and both are filled with writing in which he explores the gap between expectation and reality.

Janis pushes this exploration further in "Amnesiac," in which he overlays the image of a woman onto drawings of a brain scan. Both are done in graffiti and encased in a block of clear glass, inviting questions about the transparency of one's own mind and its workings.

Elsewhere, Janis integrates metal stands into his work—"Self-Portrait," for example, features a cast face separated from the world by thin layers of glass filled with fine writing, its components held by a metal skeleton as elegant in its simplicity as a rib cage.

Very different in feel, Elizabeth Ryland Mears' "Shelter" series consists of twig-shaped poles of frameworked glass that form the skeletons of teepee-like structures. The structures consist of combinations of waxed linen, copper and brass wire, string, horsehair, charred wood, steel, bones and quartz wool. Their translucence and gem-like reflectivity evoke both the value we place on our shelters and their ultimate fragility and transience. This holds true whether we interpret Mears' sculptures as representations of homes or of the artist's physical body, which, she explains,

"protects my inner world."

Timmers' "Sequence," on the other hand, celebrates what happens when we are not protected and life spins out of control. Timmers replaced the glass panels of a discarded traffic light with tempered glass he melted and re-formed so that the top panel is solid, the second shows signs of deterioration and the bottom panel appears to melt and drip out its frame. "A sequence of events can lead to something beyond your control," Timmers explains as he fiddles with an electric connection. Indeed, his work took a drastic turn after the 1994 earthquake in Los Angeles, in whose wreckage he discovered material for art.

When light suddenly shines through the bottom panel, the piece takes on the role of a metaphor—a metaphor for the explosion of creativity that is occurring as more and more artists use their mastery of glass to give content the green light.

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