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Installation view.
© RITSUE MISHIMA
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Ritsue Mishima

"LUMINA"
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Ritsue Mishima's ethereal, colorless glass forms are the poetic embodiment of light and movement. As breath is forced in and the heat of the molten material expands the interior air, the glass swells. It resists and yields as the shimmering legs of waxed vertical constrictors¹ dance across a watery, glazed skin. Various smooth and sweeping, filled with staccato effervescence, constructed from forms reminiscent of Venetian *bricole* (the wooden posts that

protrude vertically from the lagoon as navigational tools for boats), the glass swirls and twists in a deceptively peaceful monsoon. The works, some more than others, successfully embody the tension inherent to the material: its transfigurative ability to capture a fleeting moment, move from liquid to solid, yet maintain the vitality of a material in motion.

If one investigates the titles of individual works, a geography emerges. *Jomon* (2019) refers to the Japanese Jōmon period (c. 14,500 to 300 BCE), notable for cord-marked ceramic vessels, represented here with tool marks in the form of convex spheres and protruding vertical ridges of glass. Related, *Dogu* (2019) are the small

humanoid and animal figurines created during the same period in Japanese history. Other titles recall Italian locations, such as *Pietralunga* (2019), a village north of Perugia in the Umbria region, or reference Catholic theology, such as *Frutto di Fuoco* (2019), meaning roughly "fruit of the fire," and *Ascensione* (2019).

This international dialogue is a result of Mishima's own cross-cultural experience. Born in Kyoto, the artist, who previously worked as a stylist of floral installations, moved to Venice in 1989² and became enchanted with Muranese glass and the glassmaking process. Mishima doesn't work the material herself; she collaborates with the maestros of her adopted country, including Andrea Zilio, Giacomo Barbini, and Livio Serena.³ She acts as the conductor while gaffers and their assistants translate her ideas into physical objects: "[T]here is a symphonic quality, a harmony, and it's really beautiful to work with them. I leave some space for them—I don't need to decide everything—and I always ask them what they like."⁴

After a group of glass professionals toured the exhibition at Luhring Augustine during the fourth biennial Robert M. Minkoff Foundation academic symposium at UrbanGlass (this writer was not present), questions of quality were relayed to me, specifically regarding the unusual location of punty marks and at times poor bonding of frit to some surfaces, as if it hadn't been properly heated.⁵ The question is really one of craft. Not in a hierarchical sense, but rather whether good art needs to be well crafted. And what does it mean if an artist is not crafting her own art? For centuries artists have been outsourcing the labor of art making, but the query takes on a stronger meaning when the artist doesn't possess the skills to make work in her chosen material. And what of poorly crafted art made by those who do possess mastery over their materials—the so-called "sloppy craft" phenomena of the past decade?⁶ Is this the case with Mishima's works, which are crafted by Muranese maestros? Did they find freedom in breaking the rules?

In an art world where craft is relegated to a lower status based on the materials used (this has changed for fibers and ceramics), is it hypocritical to then make a value judgement on the quality of craftsmanship? Do artists who use the material but don't work the material contribute to or hinder the elevation of material-based art? And is elevation (still) the goal, thus implying its lesser status in the first place? I will admit that I didn't want to ask these questions in relation to Mishima's work. Not because they are hard questions, which they are, but for fear that in asking them, I am contributing to a self-fulfilling prophecy of hierarchy making. I do think artists should make their own work, or at least take a leadership role in its making. And I also think that if artists want to use certain materials, they should learn to make with them, especially if their use is a sustained practice. That said, I worry that focusing on this topic may be reductive in the grand scheme of breaking down the hierarchies.

It seems that Mishima takes some part in the making of her work, as evidenced by her self-description as a conductor and a video that shows her in the hot shop, sometimes assisting, during the making process.⁷ What I will say, however, is the resulting work is quite harmonious regardless of its level of craft. The organic forms, derived from the vessel, are always rendered in colorless glass. Mishima's primary goal is to capture the essence of light, her true medium, its reflection and refraction through the glass, and the complementary existence of light and shadow. While light is inherent to glass as a material, and one must either work with it or suppress it, Mishima's explorations in light benefit from her melding of Eastern and Western culture and philosophy. The artist aptly described this interplay in an interview:

Italy is the world of sunshine. Japan is the world of the moon. Yin is Japan, yang is Italy. When the Italians see the sun, they'll bask in it, whereas the Japanese will hide from it. Even the poetry and antique writings in Japan are always about the

*moon, not the sun. The sun is direct, whereas the moon is only reflecting the light of the sun. Culturally, Japanese people are not direct. There is a huge appreciation of beauty, but it's a reflection. Italians are all about love ... straight and direct love.*⁸

At Luhring Augustine this exchange becomes evident, yet subtly so. "LUMINA," the artist's current exhibition, is an installation of 25 works in glass and a video documenting a 2017 site-specific installation in the waterway around Nijo Castle in Kyoto. The glass works are installed in a grid, each sitting on individual mirror-topped white rectilinear pedestals. Visitors are able to walk throughout the grid, gaining a closer look at individual works and observing the purposeful inclusions and differences in surface. However, it is as a group that they have their most power. In fact, without the full installation, the mirrored pedestals could be quite retrograde and the works themselves less impactful. The precision of the gridded framework acts as an organizational structure and foil for the organic and energetic objects themselves, creating a quiet rhythm and sense of movement amplified by the tranquil aural component of a video—*Tranquility* by Kevin MacLeod—which is installed in an adjacent room with a somewhat confusingly arranged rectangle of mirrored tables in front of it. The video reflects down, creating a fairly encompassing effect, but somehow it's not quite right.

The exhibition finds itself a natural home in the gallery's space, where the pure whiteness of the usual modern gallery architecture is a complementary setting rather than an outdated, sterile environment. The vaulted ceilings are sheathed with what appears to be reclaimed wooden planks (although the origins of the wood are unknown) and finished with a large skylight. Light filters through to cast a dreamy glow on the works, creating an excellent atmosphere in which to experience the installation.

During my visit, just after the gallery opened for the day, a woman entered and began gently cleaning the mirrored

pedestals and glass with a microfiber duster. After some brief conversation with the gallery attendant, she quietly moved from one pedestal to the next. The simple action was so harmonious with the work, it took on the quality of a performance.

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¹ In Karen Donnellan and Suzanne Peck's project "Blow Harder: Alternative Lexicons for the Hotshop," the artists challenge traditional hot-shop vocabulary for its inherent sexism and resulting exclusivity. "Vertical constrictors" is the recommended neutral term to describe the commonly used tool "jacks," which resemble large tweezers. I've chosen to substitute this terminology here in solidarity with the project and in an effort to provoke thoughtfulness regarding the importance of language.

² "Collateral Event of the 55th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia (May 30-September 29, 2013)," Palazzo Grimaldi, accessed September 25, 2019, <http://www.palazzogrimaldi.org/exhibitions-and-events/in-grimaldi-ritsue-mishima-glass-works/?lang=en>.

³ Ambra Medda, "Ambra Medda talks with glass artist Ritsue Mishima," Pamono, accessed September 25, 2019, [https://www.pamono.com/stories/glass-and-space](https://www.pamono.com/stories/glass-and-space; Roderick Conway Morris, 'A Palatial Setting for Surreal Imagery in Venice,' New York Times (June 18, 2014), https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/19/arts/international/a-palatial-setting-for-surreal-imagery-in-venice.html); Roderick Conway Morris, "A Palatial Setting for Surreal Imagery in Venice," *New York Times* (June 18, 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/19/arts/international/a-palatial-setting-for-surreal-imagery-in-venice.html>.

⁴ Ambra Medda, "Ambra Medda talks with glass artist Ritsue Mishima," Pamono, accessed September 25, 2019, <https://www.pamono.com/stories/glass-and-space>.

⁵ Emails between the author and Andrew Page, editor of *GLASS: The UrbanGlass Art Quarterly*, October 10, 2019.

⁶ "Coined in 2007 by artist and educator Anne Wilson, the term refers to an approach that emphasizes concept over advanced skill and process over refined product, calling into question revered traditional principles of craft." Liz Logan, "Taking Skill Down a Peg," *American Craft* (December/January 2016): 96.

⁷ Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, "Ritsue Mishima: Glass Works Venice," Vimeo, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/125034094>.

⁸ Adibah Isa, "Interview with Ritsue Mishima, Perrier-Jouët's glass artist," *Buro* (March 5, 2016), <https://www.buro247.sg/culture/insiders/ritsue-mishima-perrier-jouet-tokyo.html>.