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Ellen Jacobs: Metalwork and Glass

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The Art Museum

AT FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY



Ellen Jacobs:
Metalwork and Glass

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Essay by Cassandra Langer

June 23-July 21, 1989

The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami Florida

Acknowledgements:

The Art Museum at Florida International University is pleased to present the work of Ellen Jacobs. As part of our mission, we exhibit one of our own Visual Arts faculty annually. This has proved to be an enriching and intellectually challenging experience in the art community. In the case of Ms. Jacobs, her work in glass and metalwork represents a special place in our art program. These media are both demanding and quixotic, and this is Jacobs' first solo exhibition to be held at the Art Museum.

The exhibition required the talents and support of a number of individuals. On behalf of the Museum and myself, I would like to express my gratitude to William B. Humphreys, coordinator of University Collections, who participated in every aspect of the organization, planning, and publication of the catalog and notices for this exhibition; and Ms. Karen Goodson, who dealt with the financial aspects and records of this exhibition. I thank too Ms. Eva Buttacavoli who so efficiently handled the myriad of details involved with correspondence and publications and the interns who assisted us. Special thanks are also due to Judith Stiehm, our provost and vice president for Academic Affairs; James Mau, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, and William Maguire, chairman of the Visual Arts Department.

Final appreciation is reserved for the artist, Ellen Jacobs, whose work and shared conversations have been a meaningful part of the experience for me.

Dahlia Morgan, Director

Special Acknowledgements: Florida International University

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ELLEN JACOBS

As elemental as earth, air, water, and fire, the origins of glass are steeped in mystery and myth. Its history as an art form remains clouded and no one knows who discovered the first crude concepts. The fascination of the medium is attested to by the many contemporary glassblowers who have come to public and critical attention in the last 20 years.

Ellen Jacobs is a silversmith and glassblower with an enviable reputation in both creative fields. Graduating from the University of Chicago in 1951, she quickly pushed on to graduate work in painting, enameling, and ceramics. In 1962, the prestigious Institute of Design of the Illinois Institute of Technology

awarded her a master's degree. She has done postgraduate work at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, The School for American Craftsmen, Penland School of Crafts, and the University of California-Berkeley. Jacobs' on-going commitment to excellence is attested to by her many additional studies at the Art Students League, Greenwich House Pottery, New School for Social Research, and the Archie Bray Foundation. She has studied with an impressive roster of teachers including such nationally renowned figures as Hans Christiansen, Adda Husted-Anderson, Herman Roth, Edwin Dickenson, William King, Peter Voulkos, Karen Karnes, Robert Turner, Cynthia Bringle, Donna Nicholas,

Norm Shulman, Marvin Lipofsky, Dale Chihuly, Joel Myers, and Arnaldo Pomodoro. It is little wonder with such training and exposure that the artist had a thriving career in New York City working for internationally respected firms such as Tiffany, Cartier, Georg Jensen, and America House. A listing of her solo shows covers states from New York to Alaska. Ellen Jacobs' work has been exhibited in the Toledo Museum's Glass National II. Since 1968, Jacobs' reputation has grown, and she has gained increasing recognition not only for her metalsmithing skills, but for her outstanding activity in glassblowing as well. In 1976, her glass was chosen for the G.A.S. Invitational-Corning Museum of Glass, and the museum saw fit to purchase a piece of her work for its permanent collection. This is no small achievement in a field as competitive as glass has become in the last 15 years.

After nine years as a successful artist jeweler in New York City, Jacobs decided to return to her first love – teaching. In 1969, she took a position as an Assistant Professor in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. In 1972, she moved to Florida International University where she is presently a professor teaching Glassblowing, Metalsmithing, History of Decorative Arts (metals, glass, ceramics, and fiber), and Pre-Columbian Art History.

Since 1984, she has had numerous spinal operations; despite these physical disabilities, Jacobs has courageously continued to create new work and exhibit nationally.

Enduring personal acts are a kind of spiritual legacy, nowhere more concretely than in art. A visual encounter with Ellen Jacobs' art is an immediate confrontation with the dynamics of light. It takes a certain courage to work in a medium as seductive as glass. The temptation to be merely decorative and elegant in the extreme is always present, always at risk. As an artist, Jacobs brings to her craft a sophistication that is enviable. Creating deceptively simple objects, she draws her inspiration from a vast store of the history of art, particularly non-Western sources.

As we well know, there is an amazing variety of art objects that blend old and new techniques – traditional and modern forms to a happy effect. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the flowing, organic forms produced by Ellen

Jacobs. Her love of Chinese jade carving, Japanese ceramic forms, and the intimate scale of certain Meso-American ceremonial objects is fused with an appreciation of Expressionism and a sure knowledge of Sumi painting. Drawing inspiration from an ancient world of female figures, she makes forms which are androgynous and dualistic in nature. Although many of the artist's pieces may be seen as deriving from a formalistic stance, it should be understood as one where abstract structure and design remain paramount. The artist is not interested in current styles e.g. pop or funk art. Her glass has never had the look of hard-edged formalism; instead, Jacobs has concentrated her energies in producing rounded, flexible, and humanistically scaled sculpture.

There is a lunar sparkle to her earlier pieces with their deep shadings and evocative colorations. Since her move to Florida, Jacobs' glass has taken on a floral blossoming springing with reds, yellows, and silver overlays. Exotic colors engage in an elegant play of tone and texture evoking rivers of blue and green swirling through a landscape of light which molds them into a lustrous beauty that emphasizes openness and change, flexibility and growth. This is the essence of Jacobs' art.

In her larger, more sculptural forms, the artist attempts to harmonize relationships through an elegant measured dialectic of thinness and thickness, letting the medium itself provide changes in color and tone. The subtle nuances of refractive light passing through the purity of the glass mirrors a spirituality as symbolistically poetic as clear water itself.

Earth, air, water, and fire; aristocratic shapes full of an ancient, mysterious, and evocative force. These are the elements that are the disciplined beauty and eloquent creative power of Ellen Jacobs' art.

*Cassandra Langer, a veteran art critic, has published in **Arts Magazine, Art Criticism, American Artist, Art Journal, Ms. Magazine,** and numerous other publications. She has authored many catalogues on subjects ranging from Richard Aneszkiwicz to Deconstructing Luminism. Langer is currently finishing a bibliography of feminist art criticism – and her co-authored anthology of feminist art criticism recently won the 1989 Susan Koppelman Award for “the best anthology or edited feminist studies in popular and/or American culture.” She formerly was Associate Professor and Chair at the Art Department of South Carolina, and will be teaching at the School of Visual Arts, New York City.*



Artist's Statement

The disciplines of blown and hot-formed glass and metalsmithing call for very different approaches. Hot glass is an immediate experience, the time between conception and completion of the final form being fairly short. Metalsmithing is a very controlled, intricately planned and worked process taking a much longer time relative to the degree of difficulty and complexity of the project. I treasure the opportunity to change from one method of working to the other.

My sources of inspiration, however remote in these two media are different. The glass has been influenced by carved Chinese jade, Japanese Jomon ceramics, Expressionist and Sumi painting, fauna, flora, and artifacts of land and sea. The metalwork has been inspired at times by Pre-Columbian gold, Greek and Roman jewelry, Celtic art, Migration period jewelry, Viking and modern Scandinavian metalwork, and

the mystery and power of prehistoric artifacts.

Metalwork is approached both in working out formal design problems or in the pursuit of a particular process, e.g. mokume gane. It may also come from a particular object such as a stone or glass that has personal associational qualities, and which I wish to incorporate into a wearable ornament. I have little interest in the commercial monetary value of the materials that I use, but rather in their form, color, working qualities, and capacity for personal poetic expression. My hollow ware is meant to be functional and my jewelry is meant to relate to the human body and be worn; not necessarily by everyone, as individual differences in size, shape, and preferences would preclude this.

In closing I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help on this exhibit given by William Humphreys, Dahlia Morgan, and the museum staff.





Ellen D. Jacobs

Education:

- 1962 M.S., Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology
- 1951 B.A., University of Chicago
- 1951-1975 Additional studies; credit and non-credit: Art Institute of Chicago; School for American Craftsmen, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, N.Y.; University of California-Berkeley; Haystack, Maine; Penland, North Carolina; Archie Bray Foundation, Montana; Art Students League, N.Y.C.; Craft Students League, N.Y.C.; New School for Social Research, N.Y.C.

Experience:

- 1972-1989 Florida International University, Assistant - Full Professor
- 1969-1972 Wilkes College, Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Assistant Professor
- 1960-1972 Jeweler, N.Y.C., Work commissioned by Tiffany, Cartier, Georg Jensen, etc.

Exhibitions: (selected)

SOLO SHOWS

- 1989 The Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami
- 1983 Artique, Ltd., Anchorage, Alaska
- 1979 Grove House South, Miami (three-person)
- 1972 The Wind Bell, Centerville, Delaware, (reviewed in *Craft Horizons*)
- 1971 Wilkes College Gallery, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.
- 1970 Wilkes College Gallery, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.
- 1965 Anteroom, Anchorage, Alaska - jewelry
- 1962 Ad Lib Gallery, Chicago - jewelry
- 1956 Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago - jewelry and graphics

GROUP SHOWS; (National)

- 1987 Perfume Bottle Show, Heller Gallery, N.Y.C.
- 1981-1986 "Glass on Holiday," Gazebo Gallery, Gatlinburg, Tn.
- 1985 "Southern Studio Glass," Kingsport Fine Arts Center, Kingsport, Tn. Exhibit travelled 2 1/2 years to museums in U.S. and Canada.
- 1982 "Glass, A Gathering of Major Artists," Netsky Gallery, Miami
- 1980 "The Thirteen Collection," Sotheby Parke Bernet, N.Y.C.
- 1980 Paperweight Show, Philadelphia Art Alliance, Pa.
- 1980 "New Glass; Update 1980," Craftsmen's Gallery, Scarsdale, N.Y.

- 1980 "Women in Glass," Craftsmen's Gallery, Scarsdale, N.Y.
- 1977 "New Glass," G.A.S. Invitational Show, Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, N.Y.
- 1976 Contemporary Art Glass, Lever House, N.Y.C. (reviewed *Glass Art Magazine*)
- 1976 G.A.S. Invitational, Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, N.Y. One piece purchased for museum collection.
- 1971 Annual Craft Exhibition, Delaware Art Museum, (mention in *Craft Horizons*)
- 1970 "Crafts 1970," Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston City Hall, Ma.
- 1968 Toledo Glass National II, Toledo Museum, Toledo, Oh. One piece toured two years with Smithsonian Travelling Exhibition.
- 1954-1956 Chicago and Vicinity Artists Show, Art Institute of Chicago
- Profile, *American Crafts*, 1980
- Numerous regional and local shows, 1956-1988

Museum Collections

Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, N.Y.
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Design, New York, N.Y.

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