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Amber Cowan Gives New Life to Vintage Glass

Her work is instantly recognizable: lush, collaged tableaus in pastel colors, frozen in the middle of a drip, perpetually in motion. **By Shannon Eblen**

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This article is part of our Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how museums, galleries and auction houses are embracing new artists, new concepts and new traditions.

The candlestick from the 1920s shaped like a Roman column is a rare find. There's a candy dish from the '40s and a hummingbird from the '90s. The glass artist Amber Cowan touches each element of the sculpture as she lists its provenance.

"It's funny," she said, "because even other glass blowers get confused about what I make and what I find."

Ms. Cowan's art is instantly recognizable: lush, collaged tableaus in pastel colors, the glass frozen mid twist and mid drip, perpetually in motion.

If it calls to mind your grandmother's milk glass, it's because it is. From the dishes and figurines to the sculpted flora engulfing them, it's all vintage glass.

In "Gathering the Sky, Mining the Milk," at Heller Gallery on 303 10th Avenue in Manhattan, Ms. Cowan's works showcase a spectrum of American industrial pressed glass, from the lavender Helio shades of the 1920s to the Bittersweet Orange of the '60s. The show continues through Nov. 19.

Through much of the 20th century, pressed glass items were popular collectibles and affordable gifts, with factories flourishing in Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. In the '60s, as some factories closed, a different kind of glass entered the scene: the American studio glass movement, inspired by Italian blown glass. Young artists worked with whatever they had, often glass scraps from factories.

So, when Ms. Cowan found a forgotten and dusty barrel of pink glass in the studio of her graduate school, the Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University, in 2010, she thought, why not? "It's here, it's free, there's 100 pounds of it."



“Anthropomorphic and Melting Milk” (2017-2022) comprises flame-worked American pressed glass, a nod to the material used through much of the 20th century for popular collectibles and affordable gifts. Heller Gallery

She melted the shards into glowing balls under a torch flame, using shears to twist and snip them into her signature organic forms, and found it worked well. She sourced more of these chunks, called cullet, from West Virginia, loading her Jeep and hauling hundreds of pounds of glass rocks through the mountains back to her Philadelphia studio.

The studio, a former deli, has a wall of built-in shelves filled with vintage glass: chicken-shaped candy dishes, teacups and decorative shoes. Buckets and barrels hold sprue — the overflow from glass molds — and other chunks and shards sorted by color. A small cardboard box holds her prized collection of Cashmere Pink from the Ohio factory Boyd (too little to make into a piece, but she’s still looking).

“It’s getting more rare,” she said of the cullet. “It’s going to be gone eventually, then I’m going to have to figure out what’s next.”

But, she said, “I think that’s when artistic innovation really happens.” Luckily, the glass these factories produced can be found on eBay, in thrift stores and in kitchen cabinets across the country. She has even bought iron molds from shuttered factories. Mosser Glass in Ohio has cast pieces for her work from her molds, creating new vintage glass. It is common for her to receive packages of glass from friends and strangers. Heller started receiving pieces as soon as the show opened.

“Someone dropped these off this morning,” Douglas Heller, an owner of the gallery with his brother Michael, said, holding up a white decanter and blue pitcher.

“We get calls sometimes: ‘I inherited this from my aunt, my mother, I love them, I hate this, I can’t bear to throw it away. Do you think Amber can use it?’” Mr. Heller said. “I think of it as Amber reclaiming forgotten stories and broken dreams.”

Marian Burke, a collector of glass art, found it gratifying to turn over another collection — her grandmother’s milk glass — to Ms. Cowan, who used many of the pieces in “Cherries in Milk With Creamer and Compote.”

“I think Amber is just magic,” Ms. Burke said. “She can excite glass like nobody I know.”



“Cherries in Milk with Creamer and Compote” (2022) uses many pieces from a glass art collector’s collection that had been passed down by her grandmother. It’s not uncommon for Ms. Cowan to receive packages of glass from both friends and strangers. Heller Gallery

When Ms. Cowan first started working with vintage glass, she was mostly interested in the material and history, she said. She can pinpoint a piece’s time period and factory of origin at a glance. But now, she said, “I feel like I’m most interested in telling these little stories that are this surrealist fantasy.”

Elegant vessels and figurines set the scene and narrative. “The Bridesmaid Doll,” as it was called by the factory Fenton, is one favorite. Ms. Cowan would love to find more of that figure, if not the original mold.

Other sculptures involve playful manipulation of existing objects, like the melting cake plates held aloft by the bent fingers of jadeite ring holders in “Hands and Handkerchief.” Rows of bud vases and cream pitchers melt and twist into anthropomorphic forms, like housewares come to life in a children’s cartoon.

Heller Gallery has specialized in glass art since the early days of the studio glass movement. The gallery has shown Ms. Cowan’s work for more than a decade, ever since Katya Heller, the gallery director and Douglas’s wife, saw one of her early works, “Milk,” while acting as a juror at an auction for UrbanGlass in Brooklyn.

“It had such a fantastic gesture and these tufts of milky glass,” Ms. Heller said. “I was just completely in love with it.”

Curators respond to Ms. Cowan’s work, too, Ms. Heller said, and her pieces have found homes in museums around the country. On Instagram, @amber.cowan has more than 30,000 followers, who can see works-in-progress and detail shots in their feeds, then go to the gallery to see Ms. Cowan’s work in person.

“It’s wonderful to have work that is so accessible on one hand,” Mr. Heller said, “but has real depth on the other.”