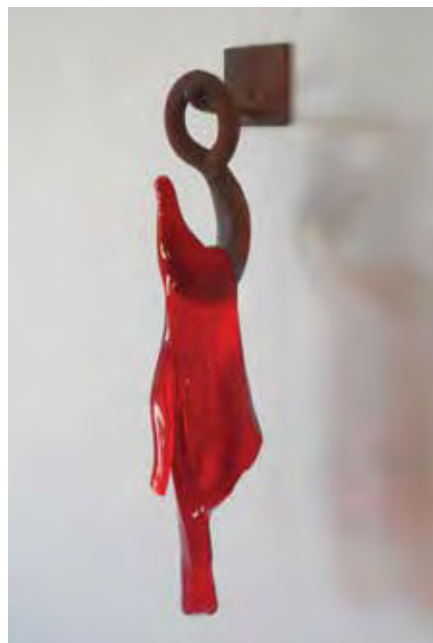




Aloft

Vignettes of melted glass suspended on metal are dialogues of intent and surrender, dramas told through **MARY SHAFFER's** enduring sculptural language.

BY ANDREW PAGE



COPYRIGHT ©2015 GLASS: The UrbanGlass Art Quarterly (www.glassquarterly.com). All rights reserved. This article originally appeared in the Winter 2015 edition of GLASS (#141). Permission to reprint, republish and/or distribute this material in whole or in part for any other purposes must be obtained from UrbanGlass (www.urbanglass.org).

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: A view of the tool wall as installed at the Mary Shaffer exhibition at the Katzen Art Center at American University.
PHOTO: GREG STALEY

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: *Torn Red Hook*, 2012. Slumped glass and metal. H 18, W 4, D 7 in.

THIS PAGE: *Draped Bar*, 1996. Slumped glass and metal. H 10, W 4, D 14 in.



Delicate One, 2011.
Slumped glass and metal.
H 20, W 9, D 9 in.



who shunned Studio Glass, Shaffer seemed unconcerned about protecting her fine art credentials.

What separated Shaffer from other Studio Glass artists was that her work never traded on its novelty alone. Her innovative “mid-air slumping,” as she called it, was a signature feature, but always in service of her highly developed aesthetic, and this has continued throughout her long and storied career, which has seen her work enter the collections of the Metropolitan, MoMA, and MAD museums in New York City alone. Her work was championed by the late critic (and editor of this magazine) John Perreault, who saw in her an example of work in glass that transcended boundaries on the strength of its execution.

There were, unfortunately, only three examples of work from Shaffer’s “Lightcatcher” series in the exhibition. *Reflected Diamond*, *Wind Marker*, and *Crossed* (all 2004) are standout works, not only because they move beyond the drip of the tool works, but because they focus on the play of light through their clear-glass surfaces. They are a different take on the duality of glass and metal; in this case, with chromed metal supports in the shape of mathematical symbols holding up slumped, clear glass sheets. The rational is contrasted and altered through the uneven and complex dappled light thrown by the slumped glass sheets, refreshing to come upon these after so many of the tool pieces, which are far from monotone but don’t benefit from being repeated well over a dozen times.

That is not to say that there isn’t a fascinating variety in how Shaffer explores and varies the glass element, sometimes an intact draped sheet of slumped glass (*Delicate One*, 2011), other times ladled hot from the



Well Wheel, 1995. Hot glass, found object. H 18, W 10, D 4 in.

Side Key, 2014. Slumped glass and metal on metal wall ledge. H 13, W 12, D 8 in.





L TO R: *Blue Folds*, 2014. Slumped glass and metal. H 24, W 24, D 9 in.; *Yellow Light*, 2014. Slumped glass and metal. H 24, W 24, D 9 in.; *Folded Orange*, 2014. Slumped glass and metal. H 24, W 25, D 9 in.



Yellow Light, 2014. Slumped glass and metal. H 24, W 24, D 9 in.

specific jobs. The dynamics of the two materials were an ongoing pas de deux of the radiant fluidity of clear glass escaping from or draping over deliberate, purposeful iron forms, mixing conceptual with abstracted narrative readings (the feminine yielding and accommodating the rational masculine, in one Jungian interpretation). There are too few examples of her other series, such as the clear glass falling through a wire grid in *Curved Wire HS* (1978), an unusually direct reference to light coming through the mullions and muntins of a window. Though clear in its intent, the work is not literal; the twisted copper wire grid extends vine-like up and over the glass, tendrils reaching for something above. Like almost everything she's done, the grid piece is suspended above the ground, the partial slumping underscoring gravity's pull. It's displayed beside two *Window Drawing* pastels from 1972 and 1974, as if to underline its associations.

The daughter of a Pan Am pilot, Shaffer often flew over the Andes as a small girl, and would gaze out the window as the valleys opened up beneath her, the plane just clearing the mountaintops. When she did her first painting in third grade, she still remembers how she stood on a chair to look down at it, the only proper viewing angle she knew to regard something dramatic and profound. Many years later, living in Italy with her then-husband, who ran the Rhode Island School of Design's European honors program, she worked on a conceptual art piece, burning fireproof fabric on electric heating elements and reflecting the spectacle in a mirror she had smashed. When a shard of the mirrored glass became stuck to the hot coil, impervious to the heat, she became entranced by this material that captured light and yet was extraordinarily durable, something that might have special significance to a person in a failing marriage. She would divorce several years later, and, raising two daughters alone, was drawn to the camaraderie of the Studio Glass movement led by Dale Chihuly (she was the first Pilchuck artist-in-residence in 1979), which she encountered in Providence. Though she did exhibit at glass galleries, she was always represented by contemporary art galleries specializing in painting, and she moved easily between the worlds (though some glass artists reportedly noted her distance), finding collectors and supporters in each world. Unlike some of her contemporaries



Folded Orange, 2014. Slumped glass and metal. H 24, W 25, D 9 in.

Shaffer freed slumped glass from taking predetermined shape by discarding molds in favor of experimental stands and supports that gave serendipity and chance partial authorship.

Delicate One, 2011.
Slumped glass and metal.
H 20, W 9, D 9 in.



who shunned Studio Glass, Shaffer seemed unconcerned about protecting her fine art credentials.

What separated Shaffer from other Studio Glass artists was that her work never traded on its novelty alone. Her innovative “mid-air slumping,” as she called it, was a signature feature, but always in service of her highly developed aesthetic, and this has continued throughout her long and storied career, which has seen her work enter the collections of the Metropolitan, MoMA, and MAD museums in New York City alone. Her work was championed by the late critic (and editor of this magazine) John Perreault, who saw in her an example of work in glass that transcended boundaries on the strength of its execution.

There were, unfortunately, only three examples of work from Shaffer’s “Lightcatcher” series in the exhibition. *Reflected Diamond*, *Wind Marker*, and *Crossed* (all 2004) are standout works, not only because they move beyond the drip of the tool works, but because they focus on the play of light through their clear-glass surfaces. They are a different take on the duality of glass and metal; in this case, with chromed metal supports in the shape of mathematical symbols holding up slumped, clear glass sheets. The rational is contrasted and altered through the uneven and complex dappled light thrown by the slumped glass sheets, refreshing to come upon these after so many of the tool pieces, which are far from monotone but don’t benefit from being repeated well over a dozen times.

That is not to say that there isn’t a fascinating variety in how Shaffer explores and varies the glass element, sometimes an intact draped sheet of slumped glass (*Delicate One*, 2011), other times ladled hot from the



Well Wheel, 1995. Hot glass, found object. H 18, W 10, D 4 in.

Side Key, 2014. Slumped glass and metal on metal wall ledge. H 13, W 12, D 8 in.





Carrots, 1976. Slumped glass with wire. H 25, W 17, D 5 in.

PHOTO: GEORGE ERML

(Note: This work was not on exhibit at the Katzen but is similar to the 1978 work *Curved Wire HS*, a photo of which was not available.)



Red-Green Open, 1998. Slumped glass and metal. H 57, W 32, D 27 in.

PHOTO: GREG STALEY

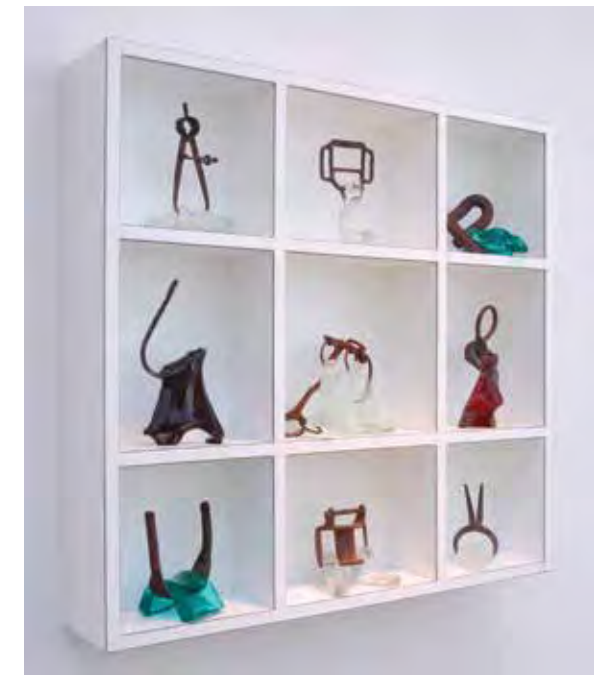
furnace, cascading over the rough patina of a pulley (*Well Wheel*, 1995). Notable splashes of color provide a rhythm to the sequence, a reflection of Shaffer's expanded palette after she moved in 2000 to Taos, New Mexico, where she found the high altitude and Southwestern climate demanded color. The tools themselves, made by anonymous blacksmiths, are carefully chosen from her vast collection, selected for their associations with the body and reference to the resourcefulness of another era, when people hammered mechanical fixes out of hot iron on their ranch or farm.

Three 2014 wall-mounted works—*Blue Folds*, *Yellow Light*, and *Folded Orange*—demonstrate how Shaffer manages to update herself, allowing the glass in *Folded Orange* to crumple into a heavy fold at the bottom of the wire grid basket, the thicker glass warping the light that passes through, adding a different kind of mystery to the more regular wire pattern shadow. Arranged alongside the blue and yellow works, the interplay of colors is a testament to her painterly knowledge.

The exhibition's freewheeling mix of work from different chronologies allows one to marvel at Shaffer's inventiveness, but stops the show from having the feeling of a true retrospective and diminishes a systematic understanding of the artist's evolution. The newest work on display is the 2015 *Tool-Box* work, with nine niches for smaller versions of her work, clearly made especially for the show. This candy sampler of Lilliputian renditions of her signature work is another curatorial misstep that diminishes the remarkable work inside the main galleries.

Thankfully, neither of these problems is sufficient to undercut the power of Shaffer's oeuvre, which deftly harnesses the allure of glass, its dazzlingly fluid nature, to ideas about the interplay between individual psyches, states of being, materials, natural forces, and, ultimately, between form and concept. ■

ANDREW PAGE is the editor of GLASS.



Tool-Box, 2015. Nine glass and metal pieces, wooden wall box. H 27, W 27, D 8 in.

PHOTO: GREG STALEY