

Retief van Wyk





Possible Landscapes in Glass
by Miranthe Staden-Garbett

The art of glass has an illustrious tradition stretching over 4500 years. Legend has it that glass was discovered on the shores of a marsh in Phoenicia by shipwrecked merchants. Roman historian Pliny recounted how they used the blocks of natron¹ they were carrying as cargo to prop up their cooking pots. To their astonishment, the combination of fire, sand and natron, formed a translucent stream of molten glass. Archaeological evidence, however, situates the first man-made production of glass beads, seals and small ornaments in Mesopotamia much earlier, circa 2500 BC.

From its humble beginnings, this alchemical product of fire and earth rose meteorically to become a symbol of wealth, unearthly beauty, solid practicality and glamorous modernity. The ability of glass to transform when blown, slumped, cast or fused as in these landscapes and objects, from a molten liquid into a frozen solid, has made it one of the most versatile substances known to man.

In ancient times this man-made commodity was as precious as gold. Later the mystical qualities of light and colour



were sublimely captured in the stained glass of the Gothic cathedrals, those windows onto another world. In the twentieth century, glass and steel skyscrapers celebrated modern man's technological prowess and power. Industrial mass production rendered glass commonplace and functional, with little to remind us of its former glory. Glass has had many lives.

Contemporary Studio Glass originated in the 1960s in an attempt to revive the art of glassmaking. Since then, this ancient medium has evolved into one of the newest and most exciting art forms around today. In South Africa, unlike overseas, glass artists are a rare breed who, for better and worse, still work on the margins. Retief van Wyk is one of South Africa's leading glass practitioners, whose pioneering efforts in the industry have helped to establish and promote awareness of this medium as an art form. This latest exhibition comprises glass landscapes that break new ground. Neither sculpture, nor mosaic, nor painting, they combine elements of all three. Form, colour and line come together here in surprising ways, creating an unusual aesthetic.

Van Wyk's early forays into ceramics and printmaking reveal his dedication to craftsmanship, love of form and

preference for expressive and minimalist line. Glass, he confides, chose him. Initially, it was the thrill of adventure that spurred him on to take up this new medium. Fortunately, van Wyk's sense of adventure is matched by a patient resolve to master his craft meticulously. Like ceramics, van Wyk's first love, glass is a heartbreaker – she cracks, shatters and collapses. A recent large glass painting, having gone through each laborious step of the process – importing, cutting, cleaning, polishing, constructing – cracked while cooling in the kiln. Van Wyk did not blink an eye. Glass favours those who are willing to cultivate a certain detachment while remaining unswervingly passionate. For this and other reasons glass comes close to a spiritual discipline. As with any spiritual discipline the master must submit to his object of devotion. Here the lines between subject and object, master and medium blur. It is a reciprocal and living relationship in crystallised form.

The process is marked by a combination of careful planning and spontaneity. Like a puzzle, the landscape designs are meticulously plotted and deconstructed to facilitate the unique language of glass. The glass fragments are individually designed and hand cut from sheets of coloured Bullseye glass imported from the USA for its uniquely

compatible qualities. Glass is notoriously fussy and refuses most other substances, including other types of glass. It allows some metal oxides to impart their lush, alluring colours, and accommodates only precious metals, like silver, gold and copper. The pressure gauges on show are found objects that in the cutting and fusing process take on a life of their own. The artist has envisioned a particular future for them, far from their previous mundane existence. These abstract baroque entities flaunt protuberances, lopsided landscapes and secret treasures.

Van Wyk's decision to explore landscapes in the medium of glass is an inspired one, not without precedent.² They have a natural affinity with one another. Both are composed of opposite elements, solid earth and buoyant light. A landscape's horizon is a fissure that is always broken, always fused. These glass landscapes have been constructed in accordance with the same principles of fracture and fusion. For van Wyk everything hinges on the horizon, that ever-present, evanescent line where earth meets sky. Possible Landscapes in Glass is, piece for piece, step by step, a personal pilgrimage along and around that archetypal line.

The possible landscapes that form this body of work

combine original work and interpretations of the Japanese Ukiyo-e³ master, Hiroshige. Like Hiroshige, Retief van Wyk has been inspired to create landscapes while journeying along the highway. In seventeenth-century Japan it was the legendary Tōkaidō highway, with its aura of romance and adventure, that inspired the landscapes of Hokusai and Hiroshige. From Hiroshige's *Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō*, van Wyk picked apart the eleventh and fourteenth masterpieces, namely *The Lake and Fuji in the Morning*, to fathom the secrets of its construction. His reworkings capture the minimalist clarity and expressive poetry of the originals, returning them to us through the fractured window of time, different, yet whole again.

Van Wyk's original landscapes tend toward abstraction. These landscapes were seen from the window of a car driving along the N1 highway, and are drawn from memory, not photographs. Van Wyk's creative choices favour internal coherence over naturalistic fidelity. His formalist aesthetic is directed by how each part, each shape and hue, relates to the other and to the whole. Once each piece is in place, the artist lays a transparent glass sheet over the fragments, and the final say is left to fate and the physics of glass and fire.

The work here is testimony to a unique and intimate kind of relationship, between medium and master. It is the quality of the relationship that dictates how rewarding both the process and product might be. Deceptively, at the end of the process a thing stands alone on a pedestal or wall, distinct, and distanced from its creator. And while we, from force of habit and lack of imagination, see it as a thing in itself, this is the first time that it stands alone at the end of a very long journey, symbolic of a mutual history and destiny.

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1. Natron, a natural alkali, is one of three main elements that combine to form glass. The other two are silica and heat.
 2. The Venetians, renowned for glass making, used the millefiori technique that involved fusing coloured glass strips into patterns to create elaborate landscapes that rivalled paintings.
 3. Roughly translated, Ukiyo-e means "floating world". It describes a period and style of printmaking in Japan during the Edo period in which the arts flourished.



Image: (page 3) FLAUNTING THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE OF OTHER EXPERIENCES I, 2008
Medium: Fused Glass & found objects
Dimensions: 210mm diameter

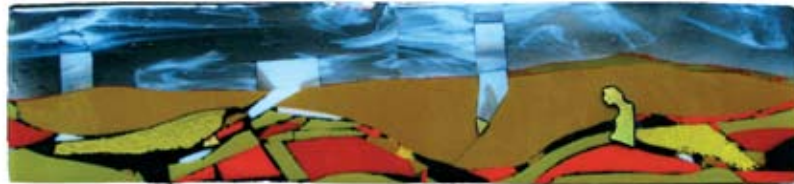
Image: (page 4) POSSIBLE LANDSCAPE (THE SPOT), 2008
Medium: Fused Glass
Dimensions: 275mm x 235 mm

Image: (page 6) THE FALL OF US ALL (AFTER HODGINS), 2008
Medium: Fused Glass
Dimensions: 530mm x 400mm

Image: (page 12 & 13) FLAUNTING THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE OF OTHER EXPERIENCES II & III, 2008
Medium: Fused Glass & found objects
Dimensions: 150mm diameter

Image: (page 14) POSSIBLE LANDSCAPE (N1), 2008
Medium: Fused Glass
Dimensions: 620mm x 145mm

Image: (page 15) FUJI AT DAWN (AFTER HIROSHIGE), 2008
Medium: Fused Glass
Dimensions: 500mm x 255mm



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