

Frozen moments in time

The work of Galia Amsel

"I was born in London, but was brought up in Hong Kong until the age of 16 when I returned to London to live with my grandparents. It was my grandmother who encouraged me to pursue art. She was from Czechoslovakia and had a lovely glass collection and was very inspirational". She feels that her experience in the Far East has affected the simplicity of her forms and her colour choices. Background always plays a role and if nothing else it led her to study 3D design at Middlesex Polytechnic in London (1986-1989). Having graduated from there with a BA she went on to the Royal College of Art to specialise in glass and by 1991 was ready to embark upon a career both as an exhibiting artist and as a visiting lecturer at numerous educational establishments in Britain.

She soon became recognised as one of the best British artists in glass of her generation, enjoying considerable success with solo shows in Britain, France and the United States. In 1998 she was one of eight short-listed Jerwood Prize finalists whose work was exhibited at the Crafts Council in London. The prestigious Jerwood Prize, considered the most important benchmark in the applied arts in Britain, is devoted to glass every five years. Last year Galia decided to move home again, this time to New Zealand where she now lives and works. Her work, which is mainly sculptural, is captivating and has easy appeal. It has found its way into numerous public and private collections. As well as producing work for gallery shows, Galia Amsel has executed commissions, including decorative work for the Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines and an environmental commission for the Lee Valley Regional Parks Authority in London. She is always conscious of making work that will enhance its environment and has commented that sometimes she feels she might have preferred to be a landscape gardener. This would perhaps explain why her work never fights the laws of spatial harmony.

Although she has worked using a variety of techniques including blowing, Galia Amsel concentrates mainly on different ways of casting and slumping glass. She likes to work alone, although a shared studio in London enabled her to exchange ideas with fellow artists. Glass casting requires patience with skills acquired after years of experiment with different firing schedules (depending on the glass mass or the kind of glass being used) In 2001 Galia Amsel travelled to the United States, to Portland Ore-

gon, where Bullseye Glass is manufactured. Bullseye is a company that has worked for thirty years with artists and art school graduates to produce a variety of glass products that enables artists to express themselves more freely in terms of colour and form. Using it requires special skills and Galia Amsel was one of the first British artists to investigate its possibilities and to make it work for her. It is typical of her spirit of adventure that she was willing to try something unfamiliar to glass makers in Britain and her initiative has paid off. The inner spaces in her work have become more interesting, the colours more fluid.

Glass casting involves endless trial and an exhausting amount of error. A piece can emerge from two weeks in the kiln cracked or broken. Working as a cast glass artist one needs patience but one also needs a spirit of adventure and a stomach for risk taking. The shapes that Galia Amsel achieves with her glass sculpture may look simple but they demand great technical expertise. Even if they emerge from the kiln in tact there is a long process of cold working, involving grinding and polishing before a work is completed. What may be simplicity itself in the mind's eye requires a combination of technical control and artistic judgement, the secret to success in most glass-related art. As a material glass is a hard taskmaster. There is much more than craft involved in being able to translate vision into reality with cast glass. Technical imagination and technical understanding combined with a highly developed visual sense are required to achieve the kind of success that Galia Amsel now enjoys in cast glass. The making of it is in itself an art form.

In talking about her own artistic vision Galia Amsel says 'The initial inspiration derives from objects that are associated with use, whether mechanical, decorative or ritualistic. By translating/restating the implied function from these objects into the work, the pieces created evoke spatial rhythm and movement for me, while retaining some resonance from the original forms'. She has also referred to her work as 'frozen moments in time'. In a sense she choreographs movement, capturing a moment of balance that has almost bodily tension. The rhythm, movements, balance and tension referred to are those of moving parts, whether they be related to the world of humans or the world of machines. 'I like things that work – machinery, bridges, things that fit together and move, work together' she says. Rectangular forms are stable but rest on the slimmest of bases. Circular forms stand secure and upright, their entire weight resting on a small point of balance. They are like moments frozen in a balletic or athletic sequence. Her visual imagery relates to the mechanics of movement. Her work, like the work of skilled photographers, freezes a gestural or operational split second, making one aware of the structural detail of things in motion.

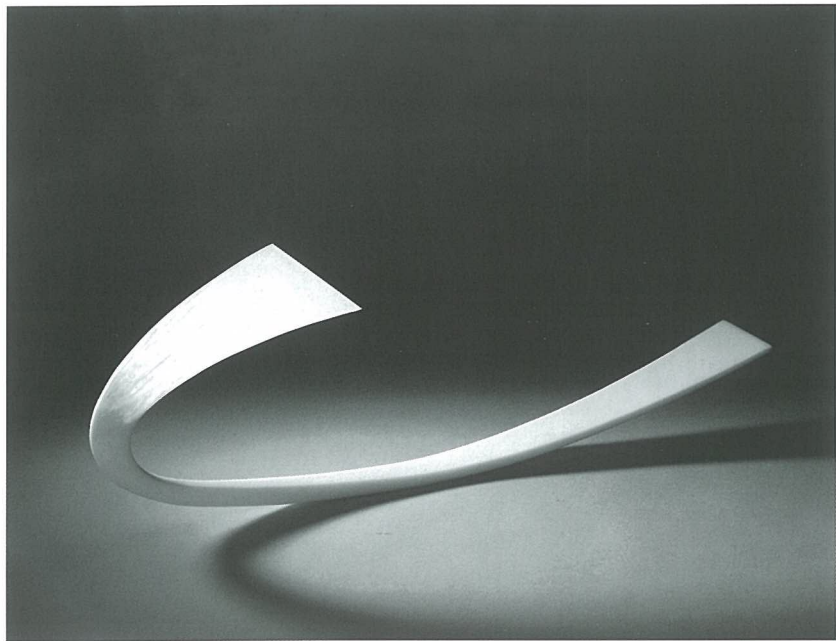
Galia Amsel's sculptures are on the whole of table top size and within that scale she manages a whole range of expressions, not only relating to movement, but also to light and shade. The forms she works with are those of basic geometry, usually circles, rectangles or squares. Basic shapes are always broken open or interrupted in some way, sometimes by cutting, sometimes by means of transparency within a colour field. The openings always create drama and tension. The empty spaces in her work are as important as those occupied by the glass mass. One can compare the force of this emptiness to the power of silence in music, or to a good actor's use of pregnant pauses. Her choice of colours is always muted. They are chosen for their lyricism or to create contrasting tones that will introduce light and shade. Occasionally there is a singing blue, which may or may not refer to an azure sky. Her use of colour reminds one of American Abstract Expressionism and the work of Rothko or Barnett

Newman. A recurring characteristic is the use of transparent interventions within a colour field. Using this device she introduces dramatic rays of light in a carefully calculated way, narrow strips of clarity that are all the more intense because of their thinness. Galia Amsel likes to refer to them as 'Revelations'. They shine with the intensity of light breaking through cloud.

A clue to Galia Amsel's thinking lies in the different titles she chooses for her work, titles that are sometimes just factual like 'Aperture' or 'View' and sometimes more atmospheric, 'Floating', 'Transient', 'Sunset', 'Frost'. These titles, like her work, are down to earth and express entire landscapes and atmospherics with a single word. Her work is both very concise and very expressive. The titles act as keys to her thinking and set us on the right course for understanding what she wants to express. She manages both colour and form with a minimalist approach. It is impressive how much varied movement and rhythm she manages to achieve from piece to piece within the simple variations of her contained forms and restrained colours. Texture, whether smooth and shiny or with the pitting of lunar landscape is also used to great effect. The different surface textures add sensuality. There is, particularly in her more recent work, a great variety of carefully controlled light and shade, or to describe it in another way, a great variety of moods. The darkness of night and the brightness of day are juxtaposed to create contrast and atmosphere. . Moods are on the whole reflective and can be threatening at times.

The apparent simplicity of what Galia Amsel creates belies the planning, the imagination and the skill that go into making it. But that is as it should be. The best art should be artless as hers is. Her work refers to landscape, to movement, to atmospherics or to a combination of all of these and it manages to convey its message with the utmost simplicity. She is also concerned with what she refers to as 'the revelation of unexpected spaces and with the questioning of spaces beyond a piece'. The objects are pleasing and harmonious in themselves. They have the resolution of mathematical formulae and the attributes of good geometry. But geometry is also full of mystery and holds endless secrets relating to our universe. Galia Amsel unlocks some of them for those who care to delve beyond face value.

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Frost. 2003.
Vidrio blanco colado en molde
Fotografía: Alan Tabor