



Mary Shaffer

Pioneer

by April Kingsley



People expect “the right tool for the job” to solve any problem, ease any chore and last forever. The measure of a tool’s quality is its ability to keep on functioning even though it is being pushed way beyond its limits.¹ What’s more, because we believe form follows function, we see our tools as endowed with innate beauty. We collect them and put them on display, or we replicate them in fine art materials such as bronze, silver and gold, and then display them that way. Countless modern artists, from Arman to Stankiewicz², have incorporated tools in their work, but few have done so as consistently as Mary Shaffer. Her enormous *Tool-Wall* in the recent exhibition, “Glass Today by American Studio Artists” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was the culmination of a career-long, pioneering use of tools in combination with glass.

Her very first non-painting work at the beginning of the 1970s involved driving nails through laminated sheets of glass. The pieces, titled *Don’t Break the Glass*, conceptually challenged that taboo by doing so. Maintaining their physical integrity while smashing the glass was the kind of technical challenge that has been a hallmark of her work ever since. Back from Rome where she had been exhibiting her paintings, she was living in Providence in 1972. She had been a painting student at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the 1960s, but was now struggling to find time for artmaking with a full time job and two little babies to tend. She was painting on the back of glass and making undulating shaped canvases in an effort to capture the memories and feelings that windows, moving curtains and reflections sparked in her of growing up in a house haunted by spirits.³ Fritz Dreisbach, a glassblower filling in for Dale Chihuly as head of the RISD glass workshop, suggested that she try slumping actual sheets of glass instead simulating them in canvas.

With no information available on how to actually accomplish this feat, she began experimenting, using the annealing ovens at RISD when they were available. “It was like skiing down a virgin slope. Every possibility was open to me,” she recalled. “And I tried just about everything...wires, brick, metal pulleys, [marbles, plants, cloth, rocks, lace] rods, metal tools.... I used the tools as support for the glass.”⁴ She kept asking “What happens if?” “What happens if

you put glass on top of nails? What happens if you suspend it in wire? What happens if you bind it and hang it?”⁵ When she questioned industry professionals and other experts about the feasibility of things she wanted to try, the responses were usually “that’s impossible.” But by constantly testing how much pressure glass could tolerate, Mary discovered that the material was amazingly strong and pliable. Besides fusing it to metal, she could weld it, cut it with a scissors under water, pull it apart like taffy, tatter, shatter or fracture it by applying different amounts of heat, and control breakage using it as a formal element. But most importantly, she discovered that glass was a vehicle capable of expressing her own powerful emotions; its innate strength and expressivity gave her a language which talked about being a woman. At some point in the ’70s she made a small laminated house out of five or six thin sheets of clear glass with these words etched within their layers:

PIEONEAR WIMON R. OFFEN SITED AS MA DELLS
BUT THEY R A PUR XAMPLE BCOS THEY HAD A
TEN DIN SEE TO DIE A LOT.⁶

She developed a system of making small, one-of-a-kind “test pieces,” using them the way a painter would use drawings, as studies for larger pieces. She says she made enough of these studies to last her five lifetimes,⁷ but most went into storage while she moved on to bending huge sheets of glass in a factory setting and creating monumental works combining steel and glass. When she bought a house in 1993 and took this work out again, she realized she “wasn’t finished with it, that she could make it louder and more available.”⁸ In 1994, she arrayed nine of the new larger tool works in separate chambers of a white cabinet titled *Wall Treasure* where they look like actors performing monologues unseen by each other. Shaffer says they have “personalities, like Daumier’s drawings of politicians, arguing, shouting and making a lot of noise.”⁹ The hooks, calipers, C-clamps and other odd bits of metal are supported by the glass, which seems improbable since it looks so liquid, lending a livening sense of instability to the pieces.

The Tool-Wall can be seen as the next step up in scale, but because the glass is usually dependent from the metal instead of supporting it, as it often is in *Wall Treasure*, a very different effect results. Sharp hooks seem to pierce the glass hanging from them like cloth or flesh, which the deep red color in some of the pieces reinforces. Thoughts of medieval torture chambers are given credence by the presence of an object that looks like a helmet, glass glittering behind its row of slits. The artist titled it *Lancelot*, and described it as “a helmeted crusader with a spirit inside instead of a man.”¹⁰ Taken individually, one can read neutral imagery (water, icicles,

Previous page: *Red Fused Hook, 1997, cast glass and forged metal, 15 x 6 x 5”.*

Lancelot, 1997, slumped cast glass and metal, 12 x 12 x 8”.

Technical 1982 for
stamped cast glass
and metal, brass
ions variable



spilling ladles, etc.), and occasionally humor, but taken as a whole the effect is rather menacing. Shreds of colored matter are left hanging from the tools like telltale traces of the terrible uses to which they might have been put. The upthrust hook implies male sexuality, but the clitoral curve of the bent glass combines with the red color and the intimations of hanging cloth to generate feminist overtones which dominate.

Indeed, Shaffer's entire endeavor can be seen in feminist terms. Her fascination with windows and light, which connote freedom to her, goes back to her years as a housebound young mother. Smashing nails through the glass was an eloquent response to feeling trapped, and embedding nails in slabs of glass or hanging it from a hook were mute expressions of life as a kind of torture. When she discovered "mid-air" slumping, she found a way to make a positive feminist statement that allowed of permutation broadly and endlessly. Firstly, though, it was practical. "The structure of the slumping process allowed me to think about it," she has said. "I could think about it taking care of the kids. I could think about it driving to work. It allowed me to continue working as an artist when a lot of young mothers were 'giving it up.'"¹¹

Traditional slumping by artists such as Frances and Michael Higgins, Maurice Heaton, Edris Eckhardt and a few of the artists who were in the "Glass of '73"¹² show with her, was done in what Shaffer calls "100 percent contact mold...[where] you get the mold recreated exactly."¹³ "Most commercial slumping is done with a mold," she explained in a statement written to accompany the Boston showing of the *Tool-Wall*, "but I like to work with chance." Elaborating on her mid-air slumping process she added:

*The structural system I create allows the glass to move with a fluidity and freedom you can't possibly envision or create with a mold. Because I work with gravity, the strangest unknown force in the universe, I say I work with nature. I call this the "female principle" in the Jungian sense—the idea of yielding and joining forces with nature, versus the 19th century attitude of "man over nature." This is the fundamental philosophy behind my glass work.*¹⁴

She chooses the tools for their shape and former utility. Many, like ice tongs, sheep shears and buggy wrenches are antiques not needed in today's world. Many were handforged, and in response she has the wallmounts handforged for them by master blacksmiths. They were largely, though not exclusively, made by men for use by men. Once she dips them into molten glass, casts them with glass, or slumps glass over them, however, she has transformed them into beautiful objects with shiny surfaces, sometimes brilliant colors and a host of new connotations. Their new identities are often found in women's things: folded cloths, skirts, scarves or handkerchiefs, veils, curtains. The glass always looks pliant, as if puffing around the invading tines or between spokes. Before, the beauty of the tools came from their function. Now it has been softly overlaid, invaded by, or suffused with beautiful curves and hues. Before they were male—yang. Now they are yin as well. Complete.

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1. Any fan of TV's *Home Improvement* is familiar with the extremes to which "Tool Time" host Tim Taylor will go to see how far he can push those tools.

2. Many dozens are included in Pete Hamill, *Tools as Art: The Hechinger Collection* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), though not, surprisingly, artists like Shaffer or Melvin Edwards, who have long been identified with using tools.

3. As a young girl in England, where her airline pilot father

was stationed, she and her siblings believed that their house was haunted by the ghosts of a former owner's five murdered wives. Moving curtains were among the manifestations of the spirits' presence.

4. Mary Shaffer, interview by Barbanalee Diamonstein in *Diamonstein, Handmade in America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 215.

5. Mary Shaffer, interviewed by Shawn Waggoner, "Your Art is What You Are," *Glass Art* (March/April 1990): 65.

6. Collection of the author.

7. Diamonstein interview, 220.

8. Mary Shaffer in conversation with the author in the New York studio, September 14, 1998. The small test pieces were not for sale.

9. Shaffer to author, September 14, 1998.

10. Mary Shaffer quoted in Nancy Princenthal, *Mary Shaffer* (Chicago: Mark Saunders Gallery, Ltd., 1998), n.p.

11. Waggoner interview, 64.

12. Some idea of the ferment around Mary at RISD in those years can be gotten from the names of some of the other artists included with her in the exhibition: Buster Simpson, Jamie Carpenter, Richard Fleischer, Dan Dailey, Harry Anderson, Dale Chihuly (Head of the Glass Department), Bruce Chao, Toots Zinsky, David Manzella, Italo Scanga, Richard Harned, Fritz Dreisbach, and Roni Horn. Like Mary, some were practicing artists; others were RISD students. Anderson's humorous use of found objects with glass, Harned's laminations, Manzella's and Fleischer's molded glass with conceptual overtones may have affected her, but Italo Scanga's placement of tools in or near glass vessels directly influenced her.

13. *Ibid.*, 65.

14. Mary Shaffer, artist's statement, "Tool-Wall," (Spring 1998): n.p.

Toolwall, 1998, hot, slumped, cast glass and metal, dimensions variable.



