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Autonomous Glasswork - Mark Thompson

Opening: November 29, 2 to 4 p.m., with an artist talk and slide presentation at 4 p.m.



Rock/Scissors/Paper



Book



Breath

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Splendour in the Glass: Autonomous Glasswork by Mark Thompson

by Betty Ann Jordan

In geometric abstract painting the grid is the invisible underpinning, the organizing principle frequently rebuffed and railed against yet always there just below the surface, like money in the big city or monotheism in Western religion. Mark Thompson's art ranges from earlier grid-oriented geometric abstractions to new figurative paintings where the grid is irrelevant. And that latter turn of events is a good thing.

A masterful glass artist, Thompson learned a great deal during his nearly twenty years of realizing architectural commissions such as his remarkable windows at St. Christopher's Church in Etobicoke. In this, his first solo show, we engage with his personal art. Among the more than thirty

works on view, in addition to the aforementioned abstract stained-glass panels (the tail-end of an ongoing series), there are also recent wall reliefs primarily of lead and glass, with lead predominating. Also there are a number of open, cast-glass books, a particularly handsome series of which is internally lit to emit a serene milky-white glow in a darkened antechamber. Other book sculptures are embedded with arcane texts and layers of line drawings just visible through the bubbles in the clear glass. All the books rest on lectern-height tabletops. As well there are several freestanding glass sculptures including an intriguing life-size loaf of bread, each clear glass slice embedded with gold leaf letters spelling out numbers. The ambitious show reaches its most successful juncture, however, with several large realistically rendered paintings on glass panels with coloured glass grounds.

Back to the grid: Thompson's earlier works, several of which have been included in the opening section, are either playful riffs on the grid *Fourteen Strings* or upbeat attempts to de-stabilize it. In *Three Sheets* squares of plum, teal and viridian dip and dive like wind-whipped bed sheets on a clothesline, with tiny ovoid puce shapes darting in and out like fireflies. Rising up from the lower front edge are three cheerily abstract forms that might be whirligigs or motifs signifying kinetic energy. Skinny parti-coloured squiggles gyrate over and through the flipping sheets like voracious caterpillars half-morphed into their glorious butterfly hues. It's Paul Klee meets Peter Max in these cartoony, busy works whose intended jitteriness is hampered by the dark leaded outlines that circumscribe each and every bit of (gorgeously) coloured glass. Ultimately they are over-articulated with every form locked in.

Clearly Thompson has come to recognize that less is more. His newest works are spare by comparison as he returns to his roots as a painter. By painting on panes of clear glass with glass-painters' enamels he's created a pair of ravishing figurative multi-paneled glass pictures. Meant to be suspended in front of a window or light source, *Breath* and *Spoons*, as they are respectively titled, exploit the artist's exceptional drawing skills, while capitalizing on the rich iconographic and physiological trappings of glass. Quite rightly, leading has been demoted to the status of an overt but non-invasive infrastructure that supports rather than handicaps the imagery.

Spoons is a two-thirds life-size, full-figure depiction of an adolescent boy standing out of doors in front of a wood-frame building. Covering his eyes are two large silver spoons which he holds, Junior Birdman-style, one over each eye, so that he appears to be wearing goggles. The spoons simultaneously deflect his gaze inward and reflect the pastoral landscape around him, a strip of which can be glimpsed around the corner of the building. While the scene is ostensibly lighthearted, there is a portentous undercurrent. Even though he's a contemporary boy wearing an ordinary animal-printed T-shirt, jeans and athletic shoes, there is something mythic about his self-imposed blindness and the empty bucket at his feet. ("When I saw my son fooling around with the spoons at the breakfast table it looked neat but it also looked like it might be important," recalls Thompson.) Even as the boy exuberantly seizes the moment, the lush pine trees, water and grass just visible in the distance evoke a carefree paradise that will inevitably recede when this young Adam attains manhood.

Breath also reels us in narratively. It depicts the heroically-scaled head and shoulders of an

androgynous young person in a blue T-shirt against a crimson ground who expels a visible breath of air that grades from frosted red to clear red. Glancing off to the right, the figure breathes strength and life off-screen as it were. (The youth's listening attitude and mop-top of thick silky hair also makes him or her resemble Joan of Arc.) Metaphysical implications abound: Buddhists prescribe mindful breathing as the key to enlightenment and liberation from the endless merry-go-round of existence. On a more carnal note, a cessation of breathing will also bearing about the flesh's earthly demise.

These pictures are seductively luminous, with golden ambient light seeping through the paint which the artist has cross-hatched with a sharp implement. But why, one asks, do such seemingly unassuming portraits resonate so powerfully on a narrative level? The answer lies in their unequivocal embrace of a glorious glass tradition extending from the middle ages, with enduring intimations of spiritual longing, illumination, transcendence. Best of all, they encourage reverie which is the earmark of art and a great jumping off point.

-Betty Ann Jordan is a Toronto art writer and art columnist for Toronto Life magazine.

Mark Thompson at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery

by David Wilde

A common thread amongst artists who choose to express themselves in stained glass when they are truly artists, is an alienation from the public perception of "stained glass". There are certain physical limitations to the medium, and some mental ones as well, to be sure; and these are, in the words of the German designer, Jochem Poensgen, referred to as "givens". For example, in architectural stained glass, panels can only be of a certain size before they need reinforcement. This is a physical given. On the other hand, an artist can paint on glass and ignore the restraints of architectural givens, when designing works for an exhibition. The artist can push/pull both extremes, and work in new areas that will help to define the future of the art, not just in Canada, but globally, both in architectural settings and galleries. Mark Thompson is such an artist.

Mark Thompson graduated from OCA as a painter, an artist who expressed himself on and through his canvas. The world being the way it is, in order to support himself, he found work at "Solarium Glass", the studio of Bill Fusner in Toronto, where he learned the art and craft of commercial stained glass. As all stained glass artists will attest, the mechanics of the craft seem to dominate the art, to begin with, at least, and Mark considered himself a "versatile drawer" whilst at Solarium. He learned the art of restoration, which provided the means of support for his artistic endeavours. While his specialty was painting as an AOCA, he learned of the "givens" of stained glass and of the order of its physicality, and in spite of attempts to abstract content, there always remains the pattern of structure.

In this exhibition, there is then, a dialogue between the physical nature of the medium, and a gesture to be free of its limitations. A painting on glass or a painting on canvas is still a painting, and Mark Thompson is quite happy to push the glass canvas to its limits. His larger than life portraits are an expression of individuality because he declares boldly that this is painting (on glass) and the metaphors of transparency are doubly important in these works. Light is being manipulated by the alteration of the surface of the glass with paint; but here, the structural components usually associated with glass are ignored and declared irrelevant. Thompson is

directing our viewing to his form and content, not that of the medium. There was a time in the history of stained glass when painting entire figures and scenes on glass brought about a decline in interest in architectural works. Mark Thompson is reinventing an iconography and scale of glass painting that suggests we look closer, both at his painting, and his subjects.

As children, we would puff "smoke" on cold mornings, and only later in life would we realize that these puffs, made visible through condensation, were actually manifestations of our lives. This is the underlying symbolism in the child's portrait, expelling smoke or breath. This can be taken, as a rediscovery of one's being, that one actually can become aware of self through the observations of proofs. This is the basis of many considerations in the world of philosophy. It is also, therefore, an attempt to express acknowledgement of the inherent symbology of the mundane, and perhaps to celebrate such a discovery in a medium that has a history of seduction.

This is one of the intellectual "givens" of stained glass. The mediocre can, to an unenlightened viewer, be perceived as art because of the seductive effects of glass. Perhaps this is one reason why Mark Thompson has retreated to a rural existence, and in doing so, through isolation from technological development and theory-driven art criticism, has been able to explore his own view of the world, through some catalyst as simple as observing and becoming aware of a child's breath. By putting messages into glass, Thompson looks beyond the surface, both of the medium, and of his content, without having to make glass unsightly. Thompson manages to converse with the viewer on both an architectural glass level, and a content level, and shows remarkable ease in engaging both.

His cast glass works are especially fascinating. Thompson combines the relief images of everyday "things", such as a toy gun, an ice cream cone, even a banana, with a layered text within the glass. He hides messages and phrases that bear little relationship to the reliefs. Thompson also confesses to including socially questionable words and quotes in some of his Blood Baf Series, as "a bit of a joke". He will laugh impishly, enjoying his naughty "secrets". Looking deeper, we might question this facade of simplicity then, for the inclusion of something nasty could be an expression of revulsion against the aforementioned seductive nature of glass, and the ease with which content can be missed by casual dismissal due to acquired exposure to the mediocre. If these notions are uncomfortable for the viewer, all the better for Mark Thompson.

And so, in spite of his declared disassociation from doing works that "pertain to world issues", Thompson wants us to look beyond the mere appearance of things, and to enjoy with him, the layering of relationships and perceptions of the commonplace. His work evokes the use of the intellect, the acknowledgement of givens, and revelry in the insolent. This is his response to self-imposed restrictions of issues. Again, he confesses that the result for him is an idiosyncratic observational methodology, bordering on a surreal world where he blends the physical with thought. Is Thompson assuming that his viewers are capable of comprehending his underlying motives, or not? His cast works make palpable intellectual demands. And the funny thing is, Thompson says they incorporate all of the elements of traditional stained glass; that is, glass, paint, patina, lead and even the wooden frame. Mark Thompson elects to use them not as stained glass, but in an exciting and explorative manner. Take, for example, his cast glass turtle on an iron chair in the Symbology 2000 exhibition at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery a few years ago, an exhibition, which invited derivative works. Lit from beneath, it contained words within the glass, and was one of the most exciting new works in the show. It stood in stark contrast to his two matching stained glass panels that hung in the same room as the turtle.

This departure from stained glass as most people would (sadly) understand it, certainly did not preclude Thompson from addressing the givens of an architectural commission. The concept of an opening book was realized by Thompson in a very ground-breaking work in St. Christopher's Church in Mississauga. Here, Thompson was not content to propose a stained glass solution so much as a thought-provoking engagement of the entire space. He feels strongly that since we are now literate (well, one would hope), then stained glass pictorials are no longer required to convey information. Words can be offered as an alternative, and Thompson offered words of certain biblical passages in nine languages, reflecting the ethnic *mélange* of the community that worships at St. Christopher's. The passages were selected by scholars at Thompson's request, and they are in the glass, symbolically in the book, which symbolically opens (physically) as the viewer approaches the altar. Using no colour except for the prismatic refractions of the exterior, the message becomes clear and congruent with the space and its users, and its use. Thompson plays the readability of the pleasing visual effects with the harder to discern messages within.

While I was visiting with Mark Thompson this past summer, we went into Kingston for dinner, for some bookstore searching (my downfall is books) and for a peek at some installed work. At Pan Chance's Bakery and Restaurant, Thompson managed to make a light sculpture of small openings in the stairwell. The given was that the work had to comply with the fire code, the glass fire resistant, etc., etc. And rather than just simply place a mosaic of colours up against the special glass, Thompson has opted to use the thickness of the wall itself as part of the piece, with multiple layers of glass, and even some leaded glass bent into shallow curves between stained and etched layers and peepholes. It is easy to miss the work at first, something that Jochem Poensgen takes as the ultimate compliment; but once seen, it is hard to resist, and the multiplicity of the glass treatments in each little aperture boggles the mind. Thompson probably never even heard of Jochem Poensgen's statements about such effects, but here he is, performing just that. No matter how he has tried to declare his self-imposed alienation from these matters, Thompson is very much in touch. He's worked at it and found things out, and he is working for himself, the artist.

Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery
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