

An interview with American artist Michael Glancy, who is presenting one of his pieces for “Treasures of Sand and Fire” at the Musee des Arts Decoratifs.

His deep and magnetic voice resonates like the echoes of the metallic materiel that he studies, explores, manipulates with expertise, and confronts the glass in a permanent renewal. His communicative enthusiasm and abundance of new ideas can be seen in the declinations of his objects, sometimes found on pedestals. He celebrates the complexity of nature and his fascination for the cosmos, quantum physics and molecular biology. If the symbiotic relation between glass and metal dates from more than 100 years ago, Glancy adds his own unique language and originality.

Michael Glancy defines himself as an “intellectual of glass.” Through his work, he seeks to convey the essence of ancestral know-how, looking to “incarnate the sacred breath which runs through the centuries of the evolution of glass.”

He draws his inspiration from museums, archives, and libraries, and gathers information by always questioning objects from the past, looking for “forms that will strike a chord.” It is the vase and its various declinations throughout the years which grabs his attention, from Pompei bowls to Marinot flasks, not to mention the vases of Carlo Scarpa. He absorbs their substantial core and goes on a conquest for the perfect object, by nature impossible but also a fundamental inspiration for creation.

With a gripping affinity for ancient pieces, he will make several nods to this throughout his career. For example, this sassanide vase, made in Persia between 200-300 A.D., of which he keeps a photo in his workshop, represents for him a critique of art and a sort of reminder that creation is in “constant interrelation throughout time.” Or, take the bowl of Pompei from the 1st Century, to which he pays tribute in his piece “Sterling Pompei (1997) by ensuring he respects the proportions of the object, the refinement of the glass, and the technique used, studied to the smallest details. Glancy also sees himself as being a fundamental part of an older and universal tradition where “there is a direct connection between his workshop and that of the blowers of Pompei,” even going so far as to compare this mysterious link with the influence that the integrated sprits of the African masks had over Picasso when he painted “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon.”

The infusion of these multiple heritages is such that we would never be able to assign a particular period of time for these works. Are we in front of Art deco vases ? Antiquity ? Renaissance ? Or even yet : futuristic objects representing cosmic landscapes on metaphysical maps ? Or again : cellular enlargements ? Maybe a little bit of all of the above ? Their titles do bring some clarity on the artist’s intentions. Sciences and cosmos are often brought together through titles that could come from science fiction novels : Cast Star X, Elliptical Radiation, Sterling Muon ...

For him, creativity is an invitation to travel in time and in space but also the best way to materialize the power of the spirit, as if he was trying to impart upon his

objects a spiritual material. Those are in fact the words of the alchemist because, in the words of Paracelsus, “you will transmute nothing if you have not transmuted yourself.”

If he appears to be attached to an older generation, Glancy does not have any less appreciation for more contemporary works such as Anish Kapoor, in whom he admires the use of tempered steel in his monumental sculptures.

Magic, the technique?

If you ask him about technique, he will reply mischievously “it’s magic!” Let us settle for this lapidary and incisive explanation to appreciate his work. If indeed there is simply magic, then there is also science, physics, chemistry and electrolysis, all mastered due to successive practices and experiences in order to reach “a satisfaction, a surprise, a spark that will incite one to appreciate the object.” His minute sense and precision is such that he creates very few objects per year, not even 10 at the most. He has a particular affinity for Crown Jewel (1980) and Steele-Blue Witness (2009). For him, the perfect objects are easily able to “guide and discipline curiosity and fascination towards interaction and interior transformation.”

His two-dimensional trays are “segments of a larger reality” he says, as if to remind us of the infiniteness of the conscience and of the imagination. They are like maps of the universe with their stars’ trajectories, their orbits in which the center of the sculpture, like an asteroid, comes to life. His pieces are for him “living things”, as if they were “possessed by a sacred force”: “the sheens and metals are chemical but also organic, they react differently with time, evolve differently with time.”

Impurities within the metallic oxide vibrantly color the glass of Glancy’s work. He rarely uses only one color rather combinations, which, by the effects of natural light, create new ones. He can only “consider the color of glass by taking in to account the light and can only take in to account the light by taking in to account the energy; color, light, and energy are all linked.” “Colors are created through metal oxides, their combinations create the color, the life, the death, uranium creates green, copper gives blue, gold the color ruby red.”

The discovery of glass

When talking about his first encounter with glass, he says he was taken aback by the vision of smoke and flames like a moth to a flame. “The primordial attraction came from the color of the fire, which, like love, became an primary anchored passion that could not be controlled,” he says. The scene is set in Santa Fe en 1971 in the workshop of glass artist Peter Vanderlean. Is it the floating desert sand what contributes to this enchantment? Or is it one of his friends who exposes him to the

artistic neighborhood of his city of birth? He will always remember that it was the magic of the moment that made him decide to abandon his studies in finance, a career that had already been laid out. So glass it was. Everything else follows very quickly thereafter with the start of the Studio Glass Movement which appears a few years earlier at the Toledo Museum. In 1972 at the age of 22, he establishes the first "glass studio" with other students of ceramics in Denver (city of birth) and self-teaches with Dale Chihuly in 1974. An untiring explorer of new techniques, his approach to glass becomes a continuous experiment. His motivation is the fear of boredom and the constant search for new techniques. The discovery of electroformation and galvanoplasty in 1978 will radically change his approach to glass, to which he will systematically add copper, gold, silver, stainless steel, nickel, and other metals. The alliance of glass and metal would become the consistent unique signature of all of his work.

The French fascination and the Musee des Arts Decoratifs

The discovery of French glass is fundamental in his career. Thanks to a scholarship from the US Government, he spends several months in Paris in 1977 and studies French glass artists Marinot, Lalique, and Decorchemont at the Museum of Decorative Arts. Marinot has such an influence that he calls him his "spiritual mentor." Glancy is particularly surprised by the respective similarities in their prep designs. He was in fact strongly inspired by the technique of rolling glass in metal filings. According to Jean-Luc Olivie, Chief Curator of the glass department of the museum, Glancy is one of the only American artists to have understood the dimension and the importance of Marinot's work, notably by the production of free form shapes. Because of this strong relationship with the French glass artist, in 1983, Glancy donates a work of blown glass "Terracotta Circle Cutback (1981)."

"Cusco" (2009), presented for the first time to the public in the exposition "Treasures of sand and fire", is acquired by the museum in 2013. Created following a trip to Machu Pichu and the sacred valley of Peru, the piece is imbued by the spiritual force that reigns the places he visited. The sobriety of his work, the super fine subtle gray, the organic and irregular form placed on top of a pedestal of perpendicular lines, the relation between the base and the object which it reflects have all filled Jean-Luc Olivie with enthusiasm. This emblematic work justifies Glancy's place in the contemporary retrospective part of the glass collections of the museum.

By his continuous research, his heteroclitic passions, his coherent work through 30 years, Glancy is an undeniable creator of the early 21st century, putting forward art that opens horizons beyond that of space and time. To this point, he likes to think that future generations will oversee his pieces, like precious and mysteriously strange objects to preserve.