

Shelby L. Stuart

Forms of Change

Maria Bang Espersen's first memories of glassblowing come from her childhood visits to her grandparents' village in the north of Denmark. There, they took her to a shop crowded with colorful vases, cups, candle holders and wine glasses lining the shelves. In the back of the store, one could stand behind a brown rope to watch the glassblower at work as he dipped an iron tube into the furnace and pulled out fluid orbs of molten glass. The wide-eyed child stood wonderstruck at the swirls of glowing color that looked like soft orange taffy. When it was time to leave, she lingered behind as long as possible to watch the liquid-like material take form.

Espersen was 24 before she returned to the passion of her childhood. In 2005, she abandoned her studies in Art History to begin her education in glass at Engelsholm Højskole in Denmark. From there she studied at the Kosta School of Glass in Sweden, followed by three more years at the Royal Danish Academy of Design. She remembers her growing fascination with glassblowing which made even the shortest school vacation seem too long if it meant she did not have a studio to work in.

The year that Espersen graduated from the Academy was also the year that she won a 2012 International Glass Prize in Belgium for her work entitled, *Obsession*. The sculpture is a twisted candy-like piece of clouded glass which looks soft enough to melt in your mouth. She freezes the moment that captivated her as a child, the brief window of time when glass is something in-between a melted liquid and a solid form. It is a moment which resists categorization or classification. It is the moment of change.

It is a state that Espersen has quickly become familiar with as her growing career has taken her from internships, to residencies, to award ceremonies, to solo exhibitions and group shows around the world. Her life has become one of almost constant movement as she travels to wherever the opportunities are waiting, whether that is Iceland, Germany, England, Norway or the desert of Oregon.

The artist's constant exposure to new people and cultures has contributed to a central element of her work which is always questioning the permanence of any one perspective. She has become increasingly interested in people's addiction to absolutes.

"We are very quick to say that something is true or false but everything is in-between. I no longer believe in those extremes," says Espersen.

Glass, often thought of as a rigid and fixed material, has become her medium to expose the fallibility of our own expectations. In a video entitled, *Craftformation*, Espersen explodes a large bubble of glass and then collects the soft shreds into a pile with her bare hand. The heap looks more like a glistening ball of feathers than the shards of sharp glass we have come to expect after an explosion.

In another video entitled, *Drinking Glass*, she has shaped the glistening strands into a cup and filled it with red wine. As she drinks from the frayed rim, the wine trickles like blood down her face making the viewer aware of their own violent associations with broken glass, despite the softness of the cup in her hand.

“Seeing is not a neutral act,” she explains. “Everything we see is constructed by our own experience.”

Espersen is not only concerned with destabilizing the expectations of others, but also her own. The artist’s relationship to glass is hardly a static one. She leaves room for the glass to surprise her.

“It has always been the interaction that has fascinated me more than the final product. I am not interested in already established techniques. I want to really investigate the material to see what is possible, to push it instead of doing what I’ve always done before.”

Espersen’s most recent work reflects the shift toward glass becoming a more active participant in her art. At the S12 Gallery in Norway, she exhibited a series of vases, entitled *Things Change*. Rocks are incorporated into the smooth surface of the vases, and it is only a matter of time before the tension between the two materials will cause the vessels to crack. She is not seeking to create objects of traditional beauty and form, but to discover how the medium can perform itself, even if that means a vase eventually exhibits itself as a pile of broken glass.

“The glass world seems obsessed with control,” says Espersen, “but I want to take the attention away from the glassblower to see what the material can do on its own. Even deconstruction can be a positive transformation.”

What is bound to keep Espersen’s work relevant and engaging is the fact that she never does experiments on the glass which she is not also willing to undergo in her own life. This fall,

the fluidity of Espersen's existence will take yet another form as she leaves behind the now familiar life of travel in order to pursue her graduate studies at CalArts in California. Despite a growing and already successful career in glass well underway, Espersen is eager to shed ideas about what her art should be, or even what medium it will take, in order to continue her transformation.

"It is about who you become," says Espersen. "My work has a lot to do with instability, and who I am has changed multiple times over the past 10 to 15 years because I am curious and open to change."

Change is the constant we can continue to expect from Espersen's work as she generates new ways to melt down the perceptions we have long taken for granted in order to let reality take us by surprise.