



Making Ideas: Experiments in Design at GlassLab

Curated by Tina Oldknow
Exhibition design by Paul+Barbara Haigh, **HAIGH**Architects

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Exhibition Narrative

‘Making Ideas: Experiments in Design at GlassLab’ showcases the Museum’s signature design program, GlassLab, in which designers are invited to work with hot glass. The exhibition features over 150 design prototypes by more than 45 international designers.

Over the last decade, the field of design has shifted from a focus on industry and architecture to a practice increasingly informed by contemporary art and craft. Glass, in particular, is being used in newly expressive ways as a result of increased access to the molten material through programs such as GlassLab. Working with the Museum’s artist-glassblowers outside the context of factory production, designers are able to explore concepts and to learn about the properties of glass in ways that were not previously possible.

What Is GlassLab?

GlassLab is a mobile, ultralight glassblowing studio designed and manufactured by Spiral Arts in Seattle, Washington, for The Corning Museum of Glass. The customized hot-glass studio and stage are housed and travel in a deluxe shipping container designed by the architect Paul Haigh. GlassLab is a mobile, ultralight glassblowing studio that can be deployed in almost any urban or rural location. This means that designers do not need to come to Corning to participate in GlassLab: GlassLab goes to them.

The GlassLab Design Program, which is headed by Museum senior director, and former Steuben designer, Rob Casseti, grew out of the Museum-sponsored —Liquid Fusion workshops at the Domaine de Boisbuchet summer design retreat in southwestern France. This workshop to introduce design students to glass was conceived in 2006 by Paul Haigh, and it has been led over the past five years by Haigh and Museum glassblowers Steven Gibbs and Eric Meek. The Domaine de Boisbuchet is headed by the well-known German museum director, collector, and design historian Alexander von Vegesack.

Through the Museum’s partnership with Vegesack and Boisbuchet, GlassLab has traveled since 2007 to Design Miami in Miami, Florida, and to the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany, during Art Basel, the prestigious international contemporary art fair. In 2008, GlassLab also traveled to New York City, where the Museum partnered with the Smithsonian Institution’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

At these venues, international designers have been invited to work on GlassLab, where, with the help of artist-glassblowers, they have the rare opportunity to develop concepts in glass. In public design performances and private workshops, designers and glassmakers collaborate, using the immediacy of hot glass as a catalyst for innovation through the rapid shaping of forms and through the exploration of the unique properties of glass.

A Program for Designers

The GlassLab Design Program extends the concept of increasing access to glass from artists to designers, encouraging designers to design more innovatively for the material. Although design in glass goes back to antiquity, designing for glass remains a new frontier.

Over the past decade, the field of design has significantly broadened from industrial production to encompass art, craft, and the unique and limited-edition object. Technologically advanced ideas are presented alongside poetic interpretation. Intellect and spirit, machine and hand, social and individual awareness, and art and craft are being increasingly integrated to achieve a more holistic approach to design. As sculptors and painters experimenting with glass have profoundly influenced the ways in which the material can be expressed in art, so may designers influence the ways in which we encounter glass every day.

One of the goals of GlassLab, and of Paul Haigh’s ‘Liquid Fusion’ design workshop, is to inspire designers to rediscover glass by working with it in a molten state. Using the concept of glass as a liquid and therefore a material that is ultimately mutable and versatile, Haigh encourages the investigation of the ephemeral and sublime qualities of glass as a rich palette for innovation and intervention through the examination of glassmaking as an art form with pertinent methodologies for today’s design disciplines. Haigh considers that design, at an innovative level, often captures material and process in an attempt to bring poetics to the mundane.

In both programs, the goal is not to design a perfect product but rather to offer the designer meaningful insights into the material. While art may be defined as embodied meaning, to quote the American critic Arthur Danto, design tends to be defined as embodied function. But meaning is also embodied in material, and it is the GlassLab Design Program's focus on material and process that aims to help the designer realize new forms, functions, and meanings for glass.

Using the resources of GlassLab, designers have the opportunity to work with multiple glassforming processes. During public performances at museums and international art fairs, audiences can observe the dynamic interplay between designer and glassmaker, as well as the evolution of the objects they create. The GlassLab program is an unprecedented way for designers to discover the potential of glass through creative exploration and experimentation. It is an immersive and collaborative experience that is informed by the ever-changing and immediate nature of the material itself.

Making Ideas

The exhibition 'Making Ideas: Experiments in Design at GlassLab' centers on material and the activity of thinking and making. It emphasizes the role of designers and the process of creation and collaboration using glass, rather than the individual glass object or group of objects.

In exhibitions at the Museum, objects are generally assembled to shed light on a theme or on history. They are thoughtfully brought together (often traveling long distances) in order to tell a story that, without their aggregation, could not be told. Making Ideas, however, is another kind of exhibition, one in which objects play a secondary role. This exhibition is a window into an ongoing program, a glimpse of what is happening now. It is a story told through images of and words about people and material.

More than 45 international designers participated in the GlassLab Design Program between 2007 and 2011. All of these designers are included in the exhibition, with video documentation and/or design prototypes. Some designers, such as Sigga Heimis, Harry Allen, Michele Oka Doner, Arik Levy, Paul Haigh, Nacho Carbonell, Tim Dubitsky, and Constantin and Laurene Boym, have had more than one session at GlassLab. Others, such as Ted Muehling, Jeff Zimmerman, and Massimo Vignelli, have worked for glass companies such as Lobmeyr, Steuben, and Venini. Some of their designs, drawn from the Museum's collection, have also been brought into the exhibition.

The concept of the exhibition space, designed by Paul Haigh, is that of a designer's loft— an open, white room. The gallery is dominated by a large video projection of GlassLab sessions in the United States and Germany, shot and edited by Deidi von Schaewen. More than 150 prototypes, or sketches in glass, made at different GlassLab sessions are shown in the exhibition. The design prototypes are grouped thematically and arranged around the room's periphery. Drawings and graphics offer further insight into the genesis and realization of ideas in glass by designers.

The prototypes range from explorations of anatomy, such as Sigga Heimis's organs of the body, to inspirations from the natural world, such as Michele Oka Doner's seaweed and coral bowls. Some designers, such as Olgoj Chorchoj (Michal Froněk and Jan Němeček), work with ideas about space and transparency, while Tim Dubitsky transforms two-dimensional graphic concepts into three dimensions. Constantin and Laurene Boym destroy glass by breaking and shattering it, while Wendell Castle considers the classic martini drinking set. Jeff Zimmerman and Paul Cocksedge examine process in different ways by immersing themselves in the performative nature of glassmaking. Most importantly, all of the designers have fun, and this is especially evident in the toylike creations of Nacho Carbonell and Sebastian Errazuriz, and the explosives of Stephen and William Ladd. Together, these typologies, or categories of investigation, build an expanded design vocabulary for glass.

Instead of documenting the exhibition in a printed catalog, the Museum has developed a content-rich Web-based app that draws on the extensive and ongoing documentation of GlassLab by the Museum. It provides information about the designers, process videos, and photographs of drawings, glassworking processes, and prototypes, as well as links to the designers' Web sites.

To emphasize the vitality and change that characterize GlassLab, new design prototypes made in sessions at the Museum during the summer of 2012 will be brought into the 'Making Ideas' exhibition. Other special GlassLab activities include the Museum's partnership with the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in presenting GlassLab sessions on Governors Island in New York City.