ANXIETY IN GLASS

A Thesis

Presented In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Art in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by

Richard Keith Dodge, B.A.

The Ohio State University

1985

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Adviser

Department of Art
This thesis is dedicated to everyone who has had doubts about their self worth.
My mind doesn't seem to work in a systematic fashion, rather it seems to operate cyclically. I think that this will become apparent while reading this thesis. The realm of my interest lies within the making of an object which will express my emotions or opinions. I feel no real connection with the more cerebral forms of modern art where the concept or idea is more important than the object. What I will do in this thesis is to explain how I arrived at my subject matter and why it is important to me.

Have you ever run out of gas during rush hour, or been thrown in jail for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or lost a lover? Do you sometimes think that the laws of fate were in some way miswritten to your particular disadvantage? You could hardly be a member of modern society if you haven't had similar experiences. My current body of work is about these daily frustrations and anxieties. I have chosen to illustrate them through self-portraits. They are done in a manner nonspecific enough to allow the viewer to insert his own emotions into his interpretation of the art work and thus strike an empathic spark in the viewer.

Why self-portraits? Is it vanity? Perhaps to some extent I am vane, but no more so than any emotionally healthy person. Here lies the point: for a long time I had been very shy and insecure which is one of the reasons why I began making art objects. I found it much easier to define and express my thoughts visually than verbally.
I've always been a compulsive object maker, possibly because it gave me an excuse to avoid any social activities. Why I wished to isolate myself is a question for psychoanalysis. Let's take it as given that I was shy and lacking in self-confidence verbally and less so visually.

As my art studies progressed I concentrated more and more on one particular medium; glass. As my level of competence in the manipulation of glass steadily increased, I found that so did my confidence in my abilities, not only in my glassblowing but in all other aspects of myself. I seemed to be able to understand and execute the techniques of manipulating glass and other materials more easily than other people and I began to think to myself; "Damn, I'm actually pretty good at this and people respect me for it."

I don't want to give the impression that I was a social cripple. I am just saying that my artwork was/is an important factor in my emotional growth.

At the beginning of my second year of graduate school there seemed to be an extraordinary amount of pressure and tension in my life. My thesis, MFA show and graduation, and the consequent uncertainties of "life after school," were beginning to be nagging thoughts in the back of my mind. The glass studio was being rebuilt and I found that a large part of the responsibility for building new equipment seemed to be mine. In addition, because of the typical clutter and disarray of construction, it was very nearly impossible for me to get any of my artwork done.
While this situation remained, I spent the time reevaluating my previous works in terms of whether or not they said what I had intended them to, and if I should continue with them. I came to a conclusion of "no" to both questions. What I had been making amounted to mimics of natural, biological forms. Essentially, I was competing with nature in its own territory. That's pretty stiff competition and I seemed to be losing. What follows is an account of how I came to be in this dilemma.

When I started graduate school I had already acquired a certain mastery of the skills and techniques of working with glass. I felt that I was technically able to make nearly any object, within the constraints of the medium, that my imagination could conjure up. The problem was that I had little idea as to what the content should be. I decided to build on past experience.

Prior to coming to OSU, I had served an apprenticeship with Steven Dee Edwards, who was then an artist in residence at The Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. His work was based on abstractions of oceanic life and were the result of many years of dedication to surfing and his consequent close relationship with the ocean. I had experienced a very similar adolescence, during which I spent any spare time in and around the water and shoreline. I felt that I could expand upon his Seaforms by adding to his premise of Aqueous Abstractions my passion for science fiction.

The resulting works, though quite elegant and sensuous, were too similar to Edwards' in both feeling and meaning. They didn't say
much about me personally and I did feel a need to express my emotions.

I had just begun experimenting with figurative images encased within clear glass when the I JUST WORK HERE show was announced. This was to be an exhibition of self-portraits done by the faculty and staff in the Art Department. I did several self-portraits in glass with the intention of choosing the best one for the show. I liked the expressive qualities of these pieces which, because they were self-portraits, were evocative of personal emotions. I began to think that self-portraits might be the best way for me to convey my feelings.

I then began to question which specific feelings were important enough to illustrate. I felt that I was under pressure to produce and, because of the previously mentioned situation in the glass studio, was unable to do anything about it. Consequently, I was very frustrated. I felt pressured, pulled, stretched and squeezed and it dawned on me that these were things that I had been doing to the glass during the forming process. Pressurizing the interior of the glass with air (it's called glass "blowing"), pulling, poking, twisting, squeezing and stretching are all part of the process of working with molten glass. Why weren't these things evident in the work?

I was subjecting the glass to all this strain, but the medium is so inherently beautiful and sensuous the objects were all so damn pretty. What I wanted to express wasn't beautiful, or nice, or elegant. I wanted Angst? I wanted pressure and tension and
distortion. The biomorphic forms that I had been using didn't show these things because when it was distorted it was simply interesting and pleasant to look at. The beauty of the butterfly doesn't show the process of its metamorphosis from a squirming caterpillar to its new, pleasant form. I didn't want pretty butterflies, I wanted squirming bugs and the struggle of life.

What I needed was a recognizable image, something that the viewer could immediately identify. What image is more familiar to us than the human face? Since my own anxieties were what I wanted to illustrate and exorcise from my soul, it seemed that my own image would be most appropriate. I realized, however, that I didn't want to be too specific about the particulars of what the sources of my anxieties were. After all, I wasn't crying in a beer to a close personal friend, I was trying to illustrate frustrations and anxiety in a universal sense. Therefore the imagery should be nonspecific within the constraints of self-portraits.

During this time I was taking a photography course. Since the instructor's specialty was portrait and figure photography, many of the assignments were oriented to these subjects. I was using myself as the model for these assignments. Initially this was because I couldn't afford a model and felt uncomfortable working with one; but, as my thoughts about working with self-portraits in glass evolved, these photographic works served to reinforce my decision to work in a realistic manner as well as to cement the self-expressive theme.

Both the photography and the glass work developed simultaneously, each one feeding upon and contributing to the other.
Tension and anxiety emerged in the photography from the glass work, while symbolic and surreal imagery were contributed to the glass pieces from the photographs.

While the photographs were no problem in respect to presentation (mat board and wall display are traditional and straightforward), the glass work was a more complex problem.

A head is, by nature, frontal. The three organs used for communication (eyes, ears and mouth) are located on or near the face. We instinctively turn to face the person we are communicating with, even though it might not be essential for communication to take place, since we can deduce only the slightest information about a person from the back of their head.

I mention these things because they presented quite a problem in my pieces. I was working with three dimensional objects that I found interesting only from one side, the face. I didn't know how to deal with the back of the head. I tried using words or images on the back to reinforce the statement that the face was making, but I wasn't satisfied with these as they seemed superfluous and hindering to the viewer's freedom of interpretation.

A second problem had to do with the display of the work. The pieces either needed a base, which too often seemed contrived, or, when made to stand by themselves, lost some of the hard straight edges that I felt they needed to counter the soft areas of the image. These hard edges were lost because of the additional manipulation in the furnace needed to make the pieces stand.
Thirdly, even when I made the pieces as large as the equipment and my ability dictated, they still seemed too small for the impact which I desired them to have. I felt that the piece should be approximately life size.

Certainly these problems could be overcome with time, but I happened upon a method to solve all of them to my satisfaction.

One of the purposes of the previously mentioned studio rebuild was to construct ovens that could be used for slumping and fusing (a process of putting glass in the oven cold and then gradually raising the temperature to the melting point). After having put so much time and effort into the construction of these ovens, I could hardly let the opportunity to experiment pass by. As a test, I slumped a failed piece into a nearly flat puddle and was amazed with the transformation that had taken place. It seemed that all of the above problems had been solved at once.

Since the piece had become essentially two-dimensional, it was perfect for wall mounting, and there was no longer any question about what to do with the back of the piece, as it would not be seen, nor was there any need for a base or additional manipulation in the furnace to make it stand. Also, because the glass spreads out as it melts and flattens, the visual size was greatly increased which brought it quite close to my goal of life size. Additional benefits of the fusing process were that I was able to fuse separate parts together, which meant that my only size limitation was that of the oven's, and that because the piece was made up of separate parts, I could be more analytical about choosing the size, shape and
positioning of the parts since this didn't have to be done during the frenzy of furnace work.

As might be expected, I was quite pleased with the progress of these works. However, as if to confirm my hypothesis that we all have our problems which once solved are soon replaced with others, I found that the success rate was about 50% due to cracking. While I was able to make aesthetic use of some of the cracks, I would like to have control over this phenomenon. As yet I haven't solved the cracking mystery, but I'm firmly convinced that, given enough time and effort, nearly any technical problem is surmountable.

One of the aspects of my work that has been criticized has been the (for lack of a more refined word) "cartooney" look of my images. This equation of the imagery with cartoon rendering is due, I believe, to the large, glaring eyeballs and gritted teeth. This imagery was, at first, the result of my inexperience with the technique of applying images in glass. As my skill grew, I had more of a repertoire of rendering style but I kept returning to the cartoon image. I liked the contradiction of the unpleasant, anxiety-riddled image delivered in the childlike style of the cartoon. Anyone who has watched cartoons on Saturday morning (and who hasn't?) is familiar with the rampant violence portrayed in these cartoons. This violence is however, not threatening, not repugnant, not even exciting in the same way a television cop show is. It's humorous. Slapstick must be the oldest form of humor. The anxiety of the violence is canceled out by the laughs. It seems to me that
this is what bothers my critics, they feel that the impact of the image is lessened by the style in which it is rendered.

Although I see my critics' point, I must disagree. As I said, I like the contradiction between theme and style. The unsettling effect that this contradiction imparts is worth the criticism that I may be, so to speak, pulling punches. I must admit that this situation has bothered me somewhat and since I feel that it's time for a change, I would now like to present some of my ideas for future work.

Up to this point, the photography and the glasswork, while being thematically similar, have been physically separate endeavors. My plan is to incorporate photographic images into the glasswork through the use of photo-silkscreen and/or photo-etching processes. This will serve several purposes, the foremost of which will be the elimination of the cartoon imagery which will be replaced by the confrontational power of the photograph. My hope is that the irrefutable reality of the photographic image, used in a surrealistic manner, will underscore and reinforce the impact of the images portrayed. Secondly, it would seem that a photo-real image will be more sensitive to the distortion effects of working with molten glass, which is one of the main reasons (excuses?) for my use of the glass medium in these figurative works. Additionally, this technical challenge will present the opportunity to keep my "tinker urge" satisfied.

I believe I've accomplished what I had wanted to do in graduate school, i.e., to create a body of work to build upon in my
professional career. I believe I'm now prepared for the next step in its evolutionary process.
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