



# GLASS

$\text{SiO}_2$

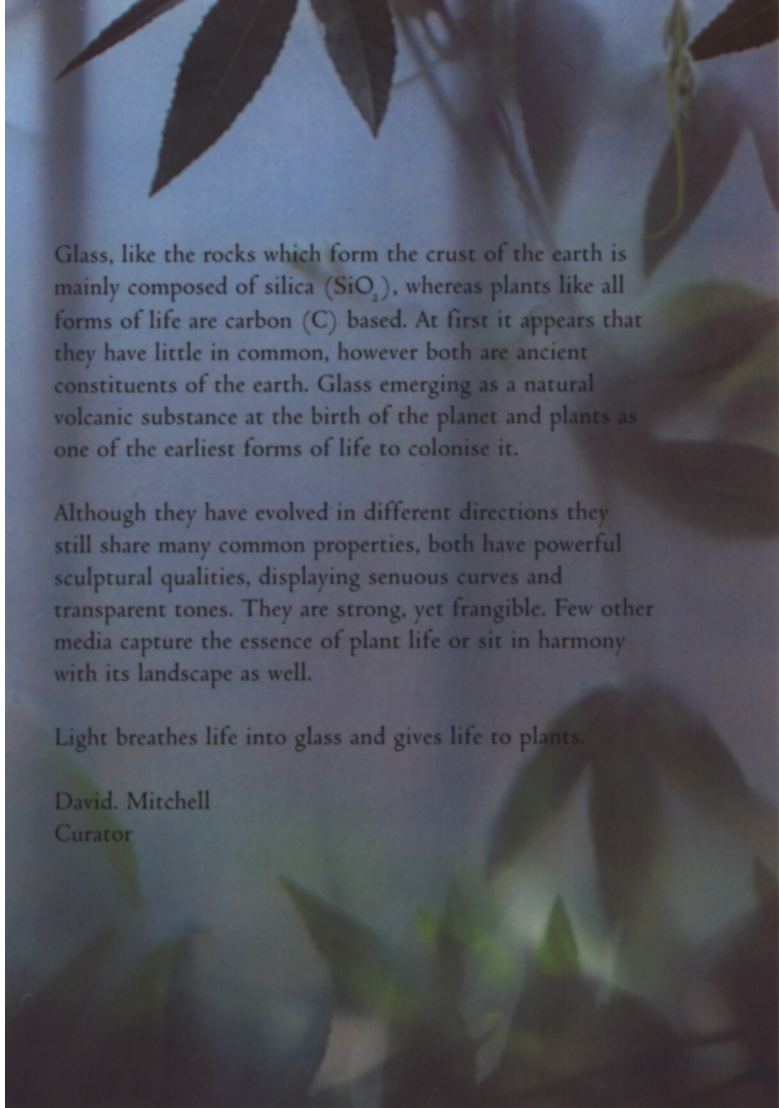
$\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$

$\text{MgO}$

$\text{CaO}$

$\text{Na}_2\text{O}$

new frontiers in contemporary glass



Glass, like the rocks which form the crust of the earth is mainly composed of silica ( $\text{SiO}_2$ ), whereas plants like all forms of life are carbon (C) based. At first it appears that they have little in common, however both are ancient constituents of the earth. Glass emerging as a natural volcanic substance at the birth of the planet and plants as one of the earliest forms of life to colonise it.

Although they have evolved in different directions they still share many common properties, both have powerful sculptural qualities, displaying senuous curves and transparent tones. They are strong, yet frangible. Few other media capture the essence of plant life or sit in harmony with its landscape as well.

Light breathes life into glass and gives life to plants.

David. Mitchell  
Curator

The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh is recognised for its devotion to art and science. The Curator of Exhibitions, Paul Nesbit, whom I originally worked for, has produced an exciting programme combining art and science for over ten years, including exhibitions such as Lothar Baumgarten and The Avant Garden.

For this exhibition 12 international artists were invited to produce site-specific work, for the rich environment of the glasshouses. Each artist devoted their ideas to concepts that related to botanical science and many were fascinated at the prospect of working with what could be termed a 'living museum collection'.

The idea to organise an exhibition of works by 12 artists, who had all at one stage graduated from Edinburgh College of Art, stemmed from the debate surrounding the problems of finding venues for glass as it seems apparent that many of the artists crossed over what is deemed applied or fine art. Keiko Mukaide and myself decided that it would be necessary to take this exhibition out of the gallery. The glasshouses in the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh inspired a new concept, that of glass encompassing glass, form and function.

We wish to acknowledge the support of The Scottish Arts Council and Edinburgh College of Art, Design and Applied Art Department, for their generous support in the production of this catalogue. We are very grateful to Martina Margettes for her strong and eloquent introduction. And finally we would particularly like to thank the 12 artists who have devoted their skills to creating innovative work and have pushed the boundaries further into understanding contemporary art and botanical science.

Suzanne Dunn  
Curator

## Art Inhabits Nature

This exhibition is a celebration of both art and nature. Their mutual characteristics of creation, beauty, surprise, colour, texture and form, spatial and material invention are here expressed in great diversity. Creativity involves a special kind of consciousness. In humans, the creative impulse fuses mind and body, a conceptual and physical process which philosophers and anthropologists, scientists and technologists have sought to understand and explain. In nature, the process is equally full of wonder and hard to pin down. We know plants are sensitive to touch and seem to have emotional responses, but we are not sure whether they think. Certainly, in these botanical glasshouses, we have a heightened awareness that they are alive and breathing and that the creation of their shape, form and behaviour is still in many ways a mystery.

This exhibition, in unifying art and nature, offers enlightenment together with sensory and spiritual renewal. There is an unusual symbiosis between the twelve glass works and the exotic nature which surrounds them: the sculptures and installations, having been brought to life by the physical and alchemical processes of working glass, now rest inert, frozen in time, but are reanimated by the vitality of nature. The fusion of latent animation in the glass works is reignited by the energy which surrounds them: leaves, fruits, seeds, flowers, rocks, water – and light.

To this symbiosis of art and nature is added that of art and architecture, because glass is the material of both the greenhouses and the art. We have always associated glass in architecture with the illumination of narratives through stained glass, of which there is an echo here in the work of Alison McKane. In the twentieth century, the invention of plate glass for architecture has made possible the large-scale illumination of pure form

in space, to reflect not symbolic narratives but the narrative of everyday life, the real world outside.

The vast panes of the glasshouses, transmitting light, exist as protection and as container of the plants and act as a foil to the versatile vocabulary of glass evident in the sculptures. These show that glass can be blown, cast, etched, slumped, folded, cut and polished, bent and fused; it can be translucent, opaque, monochrome or brightly coloured; it can be mimetic, a tiny teardrop or mythic landscape; it can be sharp, strong and cold or sensuous, fragile and warm. The artists exhibiting here, responding specifically to their surroundings in terms of ideas, deploy glass as their medium of choice, expanding public awareness of its conceptual use, beyond domestic products and architecture.

Both art and nature flourish if they are cultivated, nurtured and propagated. Here, each artist, each plant, has been specially selected to represent a particular characteristic to the visitor. In parallel with the plants, the twelve artists are drawn from habitats all over the world – Japan, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Iceland, Denmark, as well as England and Scotland – with different qualities and backgrounds, and have been brought together in one place to especially potent effect. The novelist James Hamilton Paterson refers in his novel *Griefwork* to this effect: 'It was the order that was so satisfactory, the artifice. The natural world's abundance was too dissipated, too squandered. It was diluted and thinned by distance, by vagaries of climate, by accidents of geology and the wrecking hand of man. A botanical garden, though, could be a living museum, richly concentrating varieties which in nature [and art] might not even share the same continent.'

However, alongside the notion of special selection is also survival. The propagation of culture is as difficult as that of nature. Several exhibitors are fascinated by concepts of growth but are therefore aware of mutation and decline. And what happens in nature can also happen in societies. McKane's reference to North American Indian symbolism in her work reminds one of their fate, while Kim Parry was inspired to make his *Spirit Shelters* as a corrective to what he sees as Western society's bias towards the philistine attractions of Mammon. Parry wants culture, and freedom, to thrive, and to this end the cast glass houses in his installation echo innocent childhood drawings, in which house, family, garden and street are projected in a trusting, unambiguous way. Parry knows that in the real, adult world, even 'utopia' is blemished. 'I'm a product of the New Town. Stevenage: a soulless place, done with the best intentions. I couldn't wait to get away.'

The growth and decline of both society and nature, the joy and the vulnerability of being, is the subject also of Minako Shirakura's *Fall*. This poignant and poetic installation of buds and flower pieces ('individual faces') on the glasshouse windows and on the ground reveals 'the balance and tension' between generations: 'One generation finishes and the next generation is born.' Nature's growth and change is a metaphor for the individual and society. In the cycle of life, heights can be scaled, but also, as Shirakura says, 'I want to remind myself that the fall is possible.' Shirakura's work shows that the vulnerable networks of social cohesion and the difficulties of cultural propagation are paralleled in nature. The installations by Clare Phillips, Inge Panneels, Steffen Orłowski – Ola, Anna Norberg and Tanja Heyer all refer to this theme. Norberg's *Microcosmos*, the glass, water-filled bubbles on the ground magnifying the tiny microbes in the earth, emphasizes the precarious balance of the ecosystem:

thousands of species of plant are already extinct and the life cycle cannot be sustained without the tiny invertebrates – life thus depends on the smallest elements, casually disregarded by man.

Orlowski-Ola adds the role of science to this debate on the present state of culture and nature, the salient theme of this exhibition. His forty-five huge handblown test tubes, in which he has planted hand-selected grass seeds, act as a laboratory for the survival of the fittest. Some seeds will flourish, others will not, some will remain stillborn, yet others will grow slowly and die young. The artist questions the 'artifice' of nature as manipulated by science, a biotechnological theme also alluded to by Colin Rennie's *Collector Pitchers*. His 'strangely evolved organisms' question 'how we integrate organisms into the fabric of culture, by imposing meaning and symbol in an attempt to understand'. And Parry asks, 'Who decides what beauty is? Who decides what diversity is still around?'

The beauty of metamorphosis, of growth and change, is directly observable in this exhibition. Rennie, Orlowska-Ola and Panneels, for example, specifically allow for the interaction between nature and their art, fostering change and the acceptance of a different stage of the life cycle. Their works offer a powerful metaphorical image: that different, apparently imperfect, altered states, can also be beautiful and worthwhile.

Elsewhere, the direct intervention of artist into landscape reinforces the association of this work with the interests of 'land artists', such as Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, over the past thirty years. The sensory impact of works such as *Rock Water* by Joan Holdsworth rely on the direct relationship between light, sound, water

and rock with her glass forms situated among these elements. Heyer's cast glass 'human skin' form, clothing the oldest palmtree in the glasshouses, with her glass dress imprinted with a barklike texture hanging next to it, offers an atavistic sense of our haptic link to nature; she echoes the Shinto religion's hugging of trees, a protective benediction as well as spiritual renewal, and the Zen Buddhist belief in 'the spirit in matter'.

It is not surprising to learn that these venerable glasshouses in Edinburgh were a favourite haunt of Joseph Beuys, for whom the expression of 'the spirit in matter' was fundamental to his art. All the exhibitors here seek to complement not to dominate the nature which surrounds their work – a holistic interdependence. They share the sculptor Anish Kapoor's response to the sublime: a Romantic, eighteenth-century concept of nature as an awesome, powerful enigma. The site, the ten glasshouses with their differing climate, light levels, sense of space and light, has inspired varied emotional responses, from Mai Ørsted's pleasure in interlinking landscape and domesticity to Æsa Björk Thorsteindóttir's ironical display of self-confessed 'vulnerability and frustration'. In dealing with space, time, material and artifact, the life cycle of nature and of art is here in the glasshouses at Edinburgh given eloquent expression.

Martina Margetts  
July 1998



Æsa Björk Thorsteindóttir  
Mallei Vitrei pro Aedibus Vitreis  
42 glass hammers (25cm each)  
Cast glass  
Temperate Palm House



imagery in an already rich and diverse category of studio glass.

Tanja Heyer

On my first visit to the palm houses I noticed this apparently dead tree surrounded by vital green plants. It looked quite sad and was absolutely naked. Immediately I felt the urge to cover it with something, make a dress to veil its bare trunk. Maybe it is rooted in my western upbringing, that desire to dress, to hide nakedness. Maybe it was an instinct of protection.

Æsa Björk Thorsteinsdóttir

My main field of interest is in the unconventional use of glass as a sculptural material both in its representation and making. In the past I have used cast glass combined with various other materials and techniques such as video projections to express the aspects of the human body, its functions and dysfunctions. The glass hammers build on that experience and play with the paradox created by their role as incongruous fruit of self destruction, reflected both within the viewer when confronted with a fragile hammer, and in relation to the fragility of the glasshouse itself.

Minako Shirakura

It is quiet. But it speaks to the bottom of one's heart. This is my image of glass. Transparency, fragility, contrast between heat of creation and coldness of its shine on crystallised forms, warmth of its smooth line, unexpectedness, reflectivity, its power of explosion and potential danger – all these are important language of glass to me. In the process of creation I select and lay out my "glass vocabulary" to reflect myself upon the material and glass guides me to where it wants to go. Creation of a piece is, in a way, a collaboration of the material and myself.

## Acknowledgments

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**G<sub>SiO</sub>L<sub>Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub></sub>A<sub>MgO</sub>S<sub>CaO</sub>S<sub>Na<sub>2</sub>O</sub>**  
**new frontiers in contemporary glass**

at The Glasshouses

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20A Inverleith Row

Edinburgh

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