

# GLASS NETWORK



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# THE ART OF THE STATE - PÂTE DE VERRE

MAX JACQUARD EXPLORES THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN IDEAS, PRACTICE AND MATERIALITY

In the broad fields of art made from glass, no technique seems more mysterious and yet elemental than the method known as pâte de verre. The technique has its origins at the very beginnings of glass history and can be found in exquisite polychrome inlays from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the modern era, methods of fusing crushed glass into moulds were developed into commercial art production techniques by French innovators like Henri Cros, Amalric Walter and Argy-Rousseau. Today's practitioners have further diversified the process in a wide range of personal expressions and languages.

Going back to the first generation of studio glass artists, in the early 1980s a Royal College metalworking graduate, Diana Hobson, began testing the fusing of crushed glass into investment moulds. At the North Staffs Polytechnic, Margaret Alston was also experimenting with powdered glass pastes coloured and augmented by other materials. These two pioneers would go on to exhibit the first show of contemporary pâte de verre at Coleridge in London in 1982. While Hobson was interested in exploring human connections with nature, Alston was concerned with paring down the expression of materiality into simple crucible forms. She has pursued this line of investigation right up to the present day. In Alston's work the vessel becomes a pure container of material qualities, each with its own subtle palette of light reactive qualities. She says: 'I enjoy the deliberate and controlled making process and most compellingly the expressive potential of the pâte de verre itself, its particular weight, its strength and fragility, its sound and feel, its contradictions.'

How very different are the vessel forms of Mare Saare from Estonia. These are 'nests' of bowls formed in glass and sand in a very different palette of colours that are spontaneous and painterly in character. For Saare the

significance of sand changing into glass is 'reminiscent of a continuous return – part of the timeless cycle of life'.

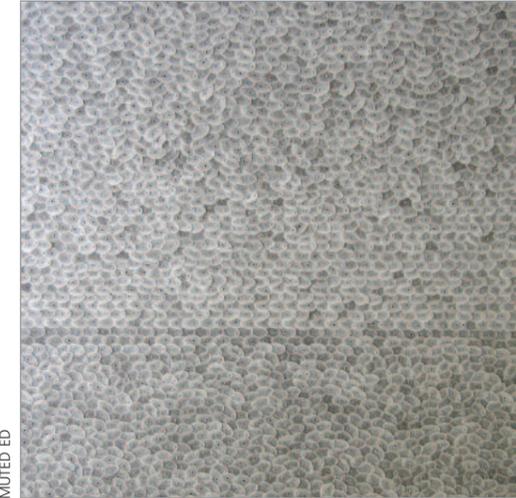
Another contemporary artist dealing with this highly personal exploration of materials is Karen Lise Krabbe, who regards her work as something more of an 'experiment with composite materials'. Her objects become a kind of 'Supernature' that she has 'collected' rather than made herself. 'I see the materials as my working partner, and I do what I can to keep her busy by introducing new matter and methods to her.' Krabbe is using scientific research as the impetus to kick-start the ideas, allowing them to run on in a process of their own.

Another artist whose process is intrinsic to the objects she makes is Anne Petters, based in Germany but currently resident at Pilchuck. Her work is simple and thoughtful in concept but in execution it is difficult and dramatic. First she inscribes the surface of a slab of investment with a fine text of writing and abstract drawing, covering this with a thin layer of crushed glass. This becomes the 'paper' holding her textual stream of conscience when it is heated in the kiln. Just as the moment of fusion is achieved, Petters opens the lid and dives in wearing protective clothing and wielding a pair of tweezers. She has thirty seconds to pick up and manipulate the thin glass sheet before it stiffens again. The process can be repeated once or twice but reheating can cause the sheet to collapse and lose its spontaneous form. The outcome is like a performance where the kiln is the partner and the resultant object is a moment frozen in time. It is about as close as kiln-formed glass gets to the drama of hot manipulation.

Sylvie Vandenhoutte has been producing unique and exquisite wall objects in pâte de verre for a number of years but this is just one part of a diverse art practice that includes works with paper, mark making and the transformation of

► PAIR KRISTIINA USLAR, 2011, PÂTE DE VERRE, 32 x 24cm and 26 x 15cm

▼ CONVERGING LINE SYLVIE VANDENHOUCKE, 2014, 93 x 93 x 6cm, PÂTE DE VERRE

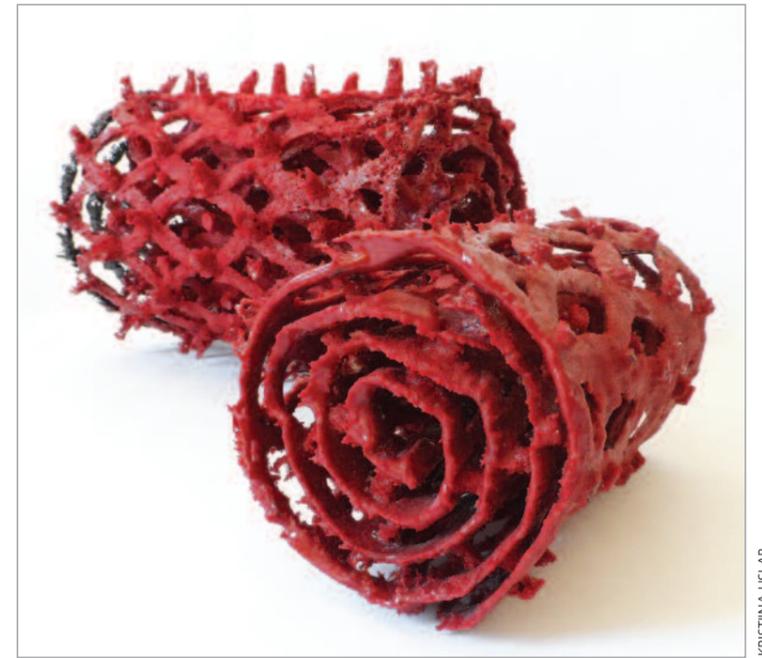


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found materials such as unused business cards. What her work in different materials has in common is a fascination with process and how this leads to a new way of seeing, using the subtleties of surface in harmony with pattern and light to create her own unique visual language. To make her work she sets up 'unsystematic and repetitive strategies'. These take the form of meditative sessions involving the building and arranging of small serial components. 'In the time it takes for the process to be carried out, the possibilities for its final form multiply so that it becomes part of a dynamic open structure.' Sylvie says that each unique aesthetic comes naturally out of the method in her work. The patterns and subtle shifts of light are comparable to peering through a lens at a world of multitudinous life forms, continually morphing and growing but with their own strange logic.

Other complex pâte de verre worlds are created by Anja Isphording, a German residing in Canada, and the Estonian, Kristiina Usjar. Usjar's objects are like miniature cities, built up layer over layer into a labyrinthine complexity. Rendered in another material they could become brutal or dehumanising like the mythical Tower of Babel but in the fragile state of fused glass they possess both tenderness and vulnerability. She says: 'It is exciting to express the idea of hard machines in the fragile pâte de verre technique, I like the contrast in my works.'

Anja Isphording's complex structures are, by contrast, rooted in organic form that is more reminiscent of botanical prints by Ernst Haeckel. Like Usjar she builds her forms layer by layer, playing with wax components and often changing the overall form as she progresses. 'The very, very slow work process that I'm using gives me the feeling that my pieces really grow, bit by bit they develop into the final and mature form.' Her working technique, using carefully placed clear and coloured frits, creates a fully fused body that is closer to the French style of Almaric Walter than the granular style of Usjar. Her working method is very similar to the Estonian's but fired at a higher temperature. Isphording's glass connects us to something organic not only through the



KRISTIINA USJAR

sense of touch but also in the way the material reacts and changes with different light. She even gives each work a number that is reminiscent of the way that a botanist would identify a unique specimen.

So what is the essential magic of pâte de verre that is found in the work of these contemporary artists? From the artists' own statements it is clear that the process of making is inseparable from the finished forms. The viewer is able to perceive the sense of childlike wonder in these works that take shape as they grow, meditatively and deliberately like the cases made by caddis fly larvae or the exquisite structures of glass sponges. Perhaps what is most impressive is that they seem to exist on the edge of what is possible; their creation achieved only by the patience and skill of the artist in anticipation of the heat that will barely fuse the form together. Their delicacy and finesse seem to defy gravity and the hurly burly of modern life. In the words of Kristiina Usjar: 'For me glass is the mediator between wonderland and reality.'

Max Jacquard is an artist working mainly with kiln casting in optical crystal. His work is exhibited internationally. Further information on current work, courses and exhibitions at [www.maxjacquard.com](http://www.maxjacquard.com)

Further info:

Margaret Alston is represented by Adrian Sassoon: <http://www.adriansassoon.com/contemporary/glass?view=artist&id=71>

<http://maresaare.wordpress.com/>

<http://karenlisekrabbe.dk/>

<http://www.annepetters.com/videos.html>

<http://sylvievandenhoutte.com/>

<http://www.kristiinausjar.com/>

Anja Isphording shows with the Heller Gallery :

<http://www.anjaisphording.com/>

for info on glass sponges see:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wqliTABoNo>

## ▲▲ COVER #137

ANJA ISPHORDING, 2011, KILN CAST, LOST-WAX TECHNIQUE, MULTIPLE FIRINGS, 21 x 30 x 30cm



JENS H. PETERSEN

▲ SKETCH FOR THE CLOUD, KAREN LISE KRABBE, LENGTH 8cm, 3D PRINTING BY HAND