

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Clarity beyond glass on display at Morgan Contemporary Glass gallery

By Kurt Shaw

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It's not often that Amy Morgan opens up her Shadyside gallery, Morgan Contemporary Glass, to artists outside of the discipline of studio glass. But for members of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh working in three dimensions, she did, with the exhibit "AAP in 3D" on display through April 3.

That's not surprising for two reasons. First, many of the truly remarkable exhibitions Morgan has organized over the years have favored glassworks of a sculptural bent over those of the crafty, form-follows-function variety. And second, Morgan wanted to partake in her own way in the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Associated Artists, a 450-member organization that was founded in 1910 to foster an appreciation of visual art and to create opportunities for artists to display their work.

"They are such a venerable organization, with a long, long history," Morgan says. "I thought it would be a great way for my gallery to get involved with their 100th anniversary celebration."

Many artists featured in the show were featured in the recent 2009 Associated Artists of Pittsburgh Exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

For example, Will Giannotti joined Associated Artists in 2008 hoping to participate in the annual exhibit. Based in Pittsburgh, where he maintains a studio in Manchester, his primary medium is wood. Incorporating traditional and non-traditional techniques to create work, Giannotti's pieces contain narrative aspects and references to the material itself as well as art history.

Two relatively massive works by him -- "Ian C" and "Chestnut" -- command the center of the gallery. Appearing at first to be steel sculptures, they are in reality made of wood, which Giannotti has bent, laminated, jointed and carved.

"The objects I construct are often geometrically based with an emphasis on the handmade," Giannotti says. His elegant works are all the more interesting the closer one gets to them.

Like Giannotti's works, Sandra Moore's sculptural raku-fired vessels have that hand-hewn feeling. Thick glazes over knot-like formations give them an organic sensibility. And her wall-mounted piece "Cracked Earth" is all the more engaging in this way, looking like a three-dimensional topographical map of a lunar surface.

Just as out of this world are the fiber works of Passle Helminski, whose

hanging pieces made of tubular knitted fiber are by far the most unusual pieces in the show. Her piece "Strong Rotation" seems to move in the wind even though no breeze blows through the gallery. "When I look at yarn, I do not see a sweater but limitless possibilities," Helminski says, and that's exactly the idea one will get when looking at it.

By contrast, works by Dana Ingham, Atticus Adams and Val Cox offer sleek, somewhat-minimal alternatives. Ingham's ingenious paper cutouts, such as the oh-so-delicate "12 Chairs in a Circle" inspired by everyday reflections, shadows, details and textures, deliver a certain whimsy while meshing good design with considerable craft.

Adams' mesh sculptures made from window screen always delight, but here they are by far his most exploratory, combining otherwise-foreign materials to this artist's oeuvre in the form of rubber washers and crushed auto glass. "I wanted to take materials that I found inherently beautiful: metal mesh, wire, broken auto glass, etc. and see what I could learn from them," Adams says.

And Cox continues his exploration of shape and volume in his three-dimensional paintings, but adding a more organic, almost human-shaped element to his otherwise static forms, as in the teal-colored "Form #44.271." "[The paintings] take their place as companions in the environment, triggering impressions distinct to each individual who encounters them -- sometimes quietly through sustained familiarity, and sometimes, suddenly and unexpectedly, in the blink of an eye," Cox says.

James Myford's abstract aluminum sculptures straddle the line between slick and coarse, as they have for decades. Here, in such works as "Dependence" and "Guardian," undulating rough and smooth surfaces give depth to otherwise stoic abstract forms, while "Compatibility (pearl black)," painted in deep black, puts an interesting spin on his signature cast-aluminum pieces.

Described as a "subtle inner strength gracefully interacting with space," his abstract, organic aluminum sculptures demonstrate his desire to develop, improve and enrich his environment. The materials became "humanized when rearranged by my ideas, feelings and hands. They became the root system, the inspiration and the energy source for my sculpture," says the artist, who has been an Associated Artists member for 38 years, the longest of anyone in this show.

Those familiar with the gallery will likely recognize the work of gallery favorites Judi Charlson, known for her figurative cast-glass sculptures, and noted Pittsburgh ceramist Ceil Sturdevant, part of the gallery's last teapot exhibition. Both Charlson and Sturdevant show confident incorporation of figural elements in otherwise unforgiving mediums.

And Bill Zarvis, with his opaque black-and-white vessels, along with Jeffrey Phelps' slumped glass platters, with their intricate patterns and luminous colors, are sure to please those used to coming to the gallery to see high-quality studio glass.

The exhibit seems more than appropriate in this space. All the better for

Associated Artists members, as well as those who have come to expect the very best by this group. And here these members certainly deliver.

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