

IF GLASS ART tends to be boring, blame it on Thaddeus Wolfe, who seems to have sucked all the creative energy out of his peers and preserved it for himself, leaving a dreck of rearing unicorns, dewdrop paperweights, and Chihulyesque so-pretty-you-want-to-smash-them chandeliers in his wake. Wolfe's forms, in contrast, occupy an underexplored middle space between speculative architectural models (think Libeskind) and storage vessels (think amphora). His works are crystalline and faceted, broken and crumbling; they have the look of futuristic buildings in which the façades have been torn open by artillery blasts.

His signature process involves creating positives in expanded polystyrene, making moulds of these, blowing glass into the moulds, and then processing the glass by selectively cutting and sanding (coldworking). These excisions call to mind the architectural surgeries of Gordon Matta-Clark and the sculptural dioramas of Gonzalo Fonseca; they offer revelatory glimpses of the innermost layer of glass, which is often a shiny, incarnadine red.

The outer dermis, meanwhile, is usually a satin or matte sheen, crenelated and patterned with colourful freckles and birth spots. In part, this contrast is an innate outcome of the glass blowing process – the inside of a glass bubble remains pristinely smooth while the exterior gathers texture from the mould.

The colours cannot be precisely directed, only nominated – they move in the liquid medium of the glass and are stretched and compressed as that liquid expands with air. Too bad the abstract expressionists spent all their time agonizing in struggle with the “picture plane”—as though simply working in three

dimensions couldn't resolve the problem of authentic dimensionality. Wolfe makes limiting color to a canvas surface seem suffocating.

Mottled, speckled, blotched, splattered, splashed, freckled, flecked, flaked, pied, dappled, stippled, piebald: it's fortunate that the English language is rich in descriptors for variegated surfaces, because each slight shift in meaning that occurs between these words captures only a bit of Wolfe's chromatic range. Glass has a delicious depth across which opacities and translucencies of color can layer; mere glazing, as in oil painting, can only envy.

Wolfe's medium is mesmerizing and diabolically difficult to master. Glass works like two-thousand-degree taffy that loves shattering. Its molten radiance is both awesome to look at and bone-searingly hot to be near. The weight of it, particularly since it must be maneuvered at the end of long metal tubes, adds to the laborious intensity of the craft. It is not surprising that so many glass artisans are victims of the beauty of their material. The pleasures of dissonance and reflexive criticality are rarely to be found in collections of glass art. Even Carlo Scarpa, who was deeply sensitive to an aesthetic of mystery and gravity, made merely lovely shapes when he worked with that lovely material. Wolfe stands apart from his field.

Glass, as you may remember from middle school, is a liquid. It is, ever so slowly, in motion. In some thousands of years, all the stained glass of all the cathedrals on earth will be multicolored pools shimmering on the ground. And we see, through the diffractive distortions of antique windowpanes, the physical tracks of spacetime flowing towards its gravitational center. It needn't take so long; physics tells

us that time speeds up with increases in heat. Rather than applying pigment and letting it dry like a painter, Wolfe generates molten motions of color and lets them cool into permanence.

Wolfe shares the show with Mattias Sellden. Each of Sellden's pieces seem gracefully composed in live edge birch boards, so that the profiles of each design are partly determined by the profile of the tree from which the board was extracted. His surfaces are finely finished with ombre stains and a glossy thick clear coat. As a body of work, there is a strong sense of unity in his vision. His compositions are spare and lyrical in form and rich and complex in pattern (the grain of the birch, the glistening sealant, the ombres and stains). At their most stripped down, they land like short but resonant odes to the sliding dovetail joint—which he seems to use exclusively.

That summed up my initial observations, so I took a look at the Friedman Benda website to see what other angles of appreciation I might try on. Terrible mistake. Friedman Benda has been one of the leading galleries in terms of their investment in a critical infrastructure of writing and discourse, particularly through their association with the curator and writer Glenn Adamson, so perhaps my mentioning this particular text is not fair. However, Friedman Benda's online description, "[Sellden] works with different kinds of wood, as they all have different qualities and are suitable for different things and uses different kinds of surface treatments" is about as useless a sentence as I can conceive of.

Sellden's work is dis-served by the absence of any rigorous critique. Nothing flourishes when fed a calorie free diet of recycled press release encomiums. Friedman Benda's video discussion of his work is heavy on generalities evoking "nature" and "culture" – as though applying those two words to

something made of wood (“nature!”) and positioned in a gallery (“culture!”) were adequate. And whether his work really reflects his belief, alluded to in the press release, that wood “has its own agency”, I am less certain.

There is a lively contemporary discourse surrounding object-oriented ontology. New angles of this discussion were instigated in the last decade by the eco-political writings of Jane Bennett, who ascribes to inanimate matter a greater share in the agency to which humans often lay exclusive claim. Artists such as Isabelle Andriessen and Geumhyung Jeong and Jes Fan are exploring these zones of thought with discomfiting depth. Moreover, it’s hard to imagine that a tree’s agency is expressed by being chopped into pieces, mechanically forced into a new form, sanded, stained and sealed. Trees behave rather differently when left to themselves.

Wood has, as Adrienne Rich puts it in her poem *Song*, “a gift for burning.” But to burn well it first must be seasoned. Sellden too may have a gift for burning—he is certainly making sparks—and there is every reason to suspect that there are flames to come.