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Crystal clear Stories

Murano blows

It could be said that glass is something rather different from other art forms. One man in particular, Adriano Berengo, is going to make sure of it. Featured at this year's Venice Biennale are modern glass pieces created on the island of Murano by artists and designers of note. Glasstress will present these gems in a beautiful palazzo alongside the canal, in tandem with top glassware gallery, Venice Projects. The soft spot for tradition and fine sense of pride residing in one man's heart are forging a swing back to the glassmaking centre of Murano, determined that it once again comes to be.

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images HUGO THOMASSEN / FABFEATURES.COM

"Peggy Guggenheim said it already half a century ago: glass is way too important to leave it to the shopkeepers and craftsmen." It is with a slight sense of regret that Adriano Berengo, owner of a Venetian glass company, cites the grand lady of modern art. Not that he holds other opinions; on the contrary, he couldn't agree more with her views. But wouldn't it have been great if this had been his line?... After all, this is what his project Glasstress is all about -- keeping the noble art of glassblowing out of the hands of money-driven salesmen and conservative purists. "I want the world to see that glass is more than a product. It belongs to the world of art."

To make his point, he gathered together glassworks by world famous artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Marc Chagall and Louise Bourgeois, for an exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2009. Not surprisingly, some of these artists were once invited to come to Venice – or to Murano, that small glassmaking island just above Venice, to be more precise – on invitation of Ms. Guggenheim herself. Furthermore, Berengo invited contemporary artists to come and experiment in his small but delicate glass factory in Murano. And they all came:

the British sculptor Tony Cragg, the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth and the socially engaged African-American artist Fred Wilson.

Going trendy

Now, two years later, Berengo is back. Better prepared and more confident. No more old masters appearing in the second Glasstress show at the 54th edition of the Venice Biennale. "This time we will only show pieces that have been made since the 2009 edition." And why be limited to the world of art? "Design and architecture is where it's happening now." For that reason, Berengo asked the likes of Li Edelkoort and Bonnie Clearwater (chief curator of the MoCa Miami) to curate the new Glasstress exhibition. They came up with big names like the renowned architect Zaha Hadid, alongside young design talents like the Dutch couple Joost van Bleiswijk & Kiki van Eyck. The styles of the collaborating designers range from the slick furniture of Patricia Urquiola to the provocative jewellery of Ted Noten and Japanese Zen-conceptualist Tokujin Yoshioka. "The world already knows that glass and art are connected by the past, now is the time to show that the glass from Murano is an art that is as refreshing and innovating

Adriano Berengo at his glass studio



From left to right:
Dutch designer Ted Noten holding a prototype of his glass gun, on show at Glasstress 2011 during the Venice Biennale

Traditional glassblowers at work at the Berengo Studio on the island Murano

Full scale model of a lamp by Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout (the final version will be made of glass)



now as it was a thousand years ago”, he says, stating his new mission.

We all know that when it comes to the producing of exclusive glassware, Murano is the place to be. The only problem is that most of what comes from ‘the glass islands’ is the best crafted kitsch in the world; even the bulk of what Berengo is producing and selling in his Berengo Studio comprises of crying Pierrots and lying Pinocchios. “It is time the world sees what we are capable of, and that is: producing the most artistic and refined glassworks in the world. Glass that belongs in museums like the Guggenheim, and not in the shops around the Piazza San Marco.”

So where other should this be presented than directly opposite the private museum Peggy Guggenheim built for her private collection on the Canal Grande? In the Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, one of the most beautiful palaces on the majestic canal running through the heart of Venice, Berengo will present Glasstress during this year’s edition of the Biennale. Afterwards the exhibition will travel to Moscow, Paris, New York and Riga. For this world tour Berengo is teaming up with Venice Projects, a gallery known for its magnificent glass collection. And yes, the collaboration with a Venice gallery will give the visitors an opportunity to buy works by Zaha Hadid, Louise Campbell, Thomas Heatherwick and Paul Cockledge. Selling exhibited art is, after all, forbidden at the Biennale. But Berengo is not in it for the money, he assures us. All his labours are devoted to the glory of the ancient art of glassblowing in Murano.

Then and now

This all started in the year 1291, when the furnaces were expelled from Venice after a fire almost destroyed the entire city. It was also more convenient for glass production to be in Murano, as it was easier to keep a secret on this tiny island. For centuries the only way for

a skilled glassworker to leave Murano was in a coffin. The glass trade became one of the pillars on which the wealth of Venice rested. That is, until the 19th century, when glass production spread throughout Europe. The Murano glass industry hit its nadir round 1850, when only five factories were left. That number has risen again to around fifty. However, over the last few years a fresh wind has started blowing through Murano, and famous producers like Venini and Salviati are working with the likes of Studio Job, the Campana Brothers and Ingo Maurer.

But no one in Murano pushes the contemporary limits of glass and art as far as Berengo. “Wouldn’t it be great to have a permanent exhibition of all those magnificent artworks from the two Glasstresses?”, he wonders. So he gives us a tour through an abandoned factory in Murano that he recently bought. Here is where he will present the remaining parts of Glasstress 2009 during this year’s Biennale. The Rauschenbergs and Cesars have been returned to their owners but there still are some powerful works left on the concrete floors and between the rusty ovens. On a brick wall hangs a series of glass objects by the French body artist Orlan. On an old workbench stands a chicken, half stuffed, half glass – a creation by the Belgium bio-artist Koen van Mechelen. “It’s not a real museum yet”, says Berengo, wiping the dust off his Italian loafers. “But just imagine all the new works here as well. You’ll have a Zaha Hadid next to a Tony Cragg or a Tokujin Yoshioka. That could well be the best glass museum in the world.” Indeed it could just well be. Berengo has the necessary contacts and guts to pull it off and, more importantly, he has the time. “The Murano glass industry is not going anywhere. We’ve been here for centuries.” #

Venice Biennial, from 4 June to 27 November 2011
www.glasstress.org