

"EVERYTHING IS THE WAY IT IS BECAUSE IT GOT THAT WAY":

AN APPRECIATION OF THE WORK OF MONICA GUGGISBERG AND PHILIP BALDWIN.

On Growth and Form, published in 1917 by the Scottish biomathematician d'Arcy Thompson, proposed a radical alternative to Darwin's natural selection: the evolution of forms was not dependent solely on the survival of the fittest, but on the powerful dynamics of the inner and outer forces that shape all organisms according to a mathematical progression. Thompson's quote, used as the title of this short appreciation of the work of Monica Guggisberg and Philip Baldwin over the past two decades, sums up, for me, the way in which these two artists have approached their chosen medium. In their work, which ranges from functional pieces for the table to large scale sculptural installations, form seems to be a magical interpenetration of the limits and demands of the material, and the limitless poetry of form and surface that these artists record.

I remember seeing for the first time the rich colour palette of Monica and Philip's early platters and bowls from their *Clean Lines* series of the 1980s and *Broadway Bowls* from the early 1990s. Saturated jewel-like colours immediately seduced the eye as they interacted with light, their tones flickering and shifting according to the quality of the ambient light or the consciously directed spotlight. In these works, surface was a matter of light beyond substance; shapes were consistently modest and yet self-assured. It was the way in which colour and light were manipulated that gave these objects their special and recognizable voice. In some instances, passages of colour were juxtaposed with clear lines of demarcation between the hues.

It was in these early works that the artists began to peel away layers of colour to expose inner layers of colour and light. The overall forms retained the rigorous simplicity of geometry; the layers of colour provided a new visual rhythm to the design. Combined with the impeccable craftsmanship that has always been a hallmark of Monica and Philip's work, the impression was intriguing and often hypnotic. The subtle colourations of these works, suggesting the transparency of delicate watercolours, attracted one's attention immediately; their true magic was in the ways in which the outer and inner forces of the material were conflated to produce a composite whole. Like the glass bubbles from which they originally emerged, it was the juxtaposition of external and internal forces that gave each piece its distinctive appearance, and maintained its meditative balance.

Soon after their success working in this mode, the artists began further and more complex explorations of edges and surfaces and their relationship to forms by modulating the surfaces. This was frequently achieved by cutting through the covering layer of colour to give the viewer a glimpse into the core of the piece – the inner world that defined form from the inside.

The Nestlé series of plates from 1996 is indicative of this evolving aesthetic, in which a rhythmic patterning served as a counterpoint to the purity of colour and elegant form. Patterns were virtually limitless in their appearance; each stroke of the cutting wheel set into motion a series of painterly gestures that underscored the individual personality of each piece. Over the years, and in collaboration with such skilled cutting masters as Paolo Ferro, the team developed a vast range of textural effects. This aspect of the artists' work became, in many ways, their signature.

These are vessels that demand close inspection to appreciate the complexity of the cutting techniques, the astonishing variety of patterns that can be achieved with the cutting wheel, and the constant interplay of colour and light that the cutting reveals. Surprising combinations of colour –royal blue and delicate peach, or pale buttery yellow with black overlay– gave each piece a distinctive personality; a sinuous and sensual organic quality assumed primary importance. *Sentinels* and *Guardians* from this series are remarkable in their organic looseness and underlying stability of form. The bodies of these works taper gracefully from swelling centres to tiny feet and necks. The extension of these forms into entirely free-standing sculpture necessitated the introduction of a metal rod to hold the cellular and often sperm-shaped forms aloft, proposing them as delicate single-celled creatures or exotic blossoms whose shapes are constantly modified by external forces. Movement –both real and implied– is fundamental to the beauty achieved in these works. Richly textured cells ranging from pure spheres to eccentric fronds were aligned into landscapes, as installations. The colours used in this series ranged from sometimes strident yellows, reds, and greens, to softly natural shades of olive, peach, plum, and grey.

More and more mutations of texture appeared in their works of the late 1990s and into the present century. The *Spindle Sentinels* of 2001 have the familiar tapered forms in translucent glass identified with these artists; the vessels, however, have been blanketed with a thick layer of dark opaque glass. The dark layer has been cut into a series of horizontal bands that encircle the vessel trapped within. The bands on each vessel are individualized with subtle “battuto” cutting as a series of jewelled bracelets permanently affixed to the form.

Guggisberg and Baldwin have achieved an exceptional balance between complexity and simplicity in their forms. While surface textures and colour juxtapositions continue to evolve, and while the forms assume more imposing sculptural proportions, they remain intimate and inward-looking. I am particularly intrigued by the *Circo di Lune* compositions of multiple forms, often strung on metal rods as if pearls or precious jewels, to create architectural elements that punctuate and define interior spaces or as imposing freestanding sculpture.

In a masterful stroke of design and execution, the artists have completed a journey, from the surface of their forms into what can best be compared to a DNA structure. The individual elements that comprise the forms are logical extensions of earlier works, in which disciplined form was combined with complex layers of colour and texture. However, strung together on curving rods, with each element meticulously positioned to reiterate the visual rhythm of the composition, these magical works are able to evoke not only the hidden structural forms of living organisms. At the same time, they serve as metaphors for the limitless universe of plants and galaxies. These artists have been able to balance the intimate and the infinite in a truly memorable way. Their forms –individually and compositionally– reflect the inner and outer forces that shape our world. Over the decades, the artists’ forms have evolved and changed, growing in subtlety and complexity while never abandoning their modesty.

Monica Guggisberg and Philip Baldwin have taken us on an exceptional journey through their glass. Beauty has always been foremost in their search for forms and colours. They have married simplicity and complexity in their work. They have exploited the plastic qualities of their medium with consummate skill. The equilibrium achieved between translucency and opacity in the medium is remarkable. Foremost in their work, however, is the continuing theme of intimacy and modesty within the poetic matrix of the infinite.

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