

Honest Shapes and Arrested Motion: A Conversation with Mary Shaffer

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On Edge, 1979. Slumped fused glass, 10 x 11 x 5 in. Photo: George Erml

Mary Shaffer, since her early days at RISD, has moved from painting to installation and sculpture, from experimentation to mastery. A new book, [Behind the Curtain: The Glass Art of Mary Shaffer](#), recounts this journey and its various tangents, focusing on conceptual work and large-scale installations, as well as Shaffer's signature glass works created with her innovative "mid-air slumping" technique. The artist—who lives and works in Santa Fe and Marfa—speaks with self-deprecating wit about the creative impulse: in her case, the embrace of paradox, "dissolving the binaries of liquid/solid, female/male, intangible/tangible, personal/political."

Jean Lawlor Cohen: How does *Behind the Curtain* handle five decades of work?

Mary Shaffer: There's no strict chronology. When I tried to make a diagram of recurring themes, it became so big and elaborate that it started to look like a tree with branches curling in on themselves. The book covers my work in glass, the commissions, and then conceptual pieces.

JLC: Why, after earning a RISD degree in painting, did you shift to glass?

MS: I was trying to find an undulating surface for my paintings, and Fritz Dreisbach, who was then acting chair of RISD's new glass department, saw my attempts with wood and canvas and my back painting on glass. He said, "Try slumping glass, it's a lot faster." Soon, I left painting for installation and three-dimensional work.

JLC: What is the appeal of glass for you?

MS: Maybe this goes back to my childhood, when we lived in the mountains of Switzerland and Austria. I loved the cold, the ice and snow. Glass is like ice. Gravity pulls both of them into new and honest shapes. And glass is deceptively strong, something I illustrate in the "Ice Tong" series—upright pieces of slumped glass that can hold very heavy implements.



Carrots, 1977. Slumped glass and wire, 25 x 17 x 5 in. Photo: George Erml

JLC: Why “mid-air slumping”?

MS: I knew that the auto industry used gravity to shape windshields, and I was open to that technique, because I never blew glass. It was intriguing to have no mold, to just control the flow in mid-air as glass melted within the kiln. I liked working with the even pull of gravity as the glass moved, and the forms created this way have a pristine geometry. Gaudí knew that, because he hung sacks of sand from ropes to create templates for his perfect arches at the Sagrada Família basilica. I love arrested motion.

JLC: Your work has been described as feminist.

MS: I’ve always thought that mid-air slumping reflects a female principle—yielding to gravity, working in harmony with the medium’s nature. The traditional masculine tendency seems to be dominating materials or nature. For me, the slumping process became liberating, because I could think about it—the permutations and the control—while taking care of kids or driving to work.

JLC: And what is the impact of chance?

MS: In my early years, chance played a much larger role. Now that I’ve worked so long with mid-air slumping, I know what plate glass does when it’s heated and moves. It transforms itself in a matter of minutes, and it becomes its own shape with no help from me. This I love. I don’t really like to impose my will on people or things.



Country Hook, 1995. Slumped glass and metal, 20 x 10 x 5 in. Photo: George Erml

JLC: What were your earliest glass pieces like?

MS: They came out of experiment and play. Therman Statom was then a RISD student, and for a birthday present, he gave me a small test kiln that he'd "borrowed" from the glass department. I'd take a break from painting and, without planning anything, I'd make a glass piece in only a few minutes. I called these small works my "sketchbooks." They became guides and prototypes, ideas for future large-scale work. I understood instinctively, from the start, that a two-inch work needed to be human-scale or larger. I felt an amazing freedom.

JLC: But you weren't studying glass?

MS: True, but with Toots Zynsky, I used the RISD kilns. For my first New York group show, I made six-foot-long tubes and lined them with neon. Because bending glass requires higher temperatures than annealing blown glass, I ended up spending the night, hiding from the night guard under a small table, waiting for the kiln to reach the right temperature. I also began to appropriate found metal objects—wire, pulleys, rods, and nails, then steel mesh and tools.

JLC: Tools continue to factor into your work, right?

MS: I love the idea of revitalizing tools—ones that were hand-forged on someone's farm or in the local village, used with love and sweat, a few even signed, their function forgotten. Some I find abandoned in junk yards and at flea markets. Even now, I leave my old tool collection outside the doors of my studio to weather. I call it my "tool garden." Using tools with glass is the meeting of opposites: one hard and unyielding, the other soft, strong, yet compliant.

In the '90s, I placed "test" pieces in a wall-hung "Tool-Box," a grid of compartments for nine small works. Soon this series jumped out of the boxes to form "Tool-Walls"—as many as 25 pieces talking to one another across an expanse. I determined their arrangement by how some "sounded" better next to each other, like instruments in a band. I had an installation at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston that coincided with a Picasso show, and I felt honored when the public and museum staff voted my "Tool-Wall" their "favorite."



Wall Treasure, 1994. Glass, metal, and wall box, 29 x 29 x 7 in. Photo: George Ermi

JLC: Could you describe an early work and its importance for you?

MS: In 1973, I did the six-foot-high *Curtain and Neon*. A year later, I made *Window Study*, an actual window frame with a cloth curtain, set in motion by a hidden fan. When I lived in England as a girl, my parents rented a large house that had belonged to a sea captain. The man married many times, and each of his wives died. My sisters and I were convinced their ghosts lived in the house, because curtains would move when there was no draft. Maybe it was then that I began to associate magical properties with flowing cloth. Later, as a young mother, housebound with two small children, the windows, window light, and curtains became metaphors for freedom.

JLC: And curtains resurfaced again later?

MS: Yes, in 2000, I cast tall, freestanding, transparent “folds” in the Czech Republic. Rain inspired a straight streaming surface, wind a billowing form. My friend there, Jaroslava Brychtová, described them as a mystery of contradictions—liquid versus solid, movement versus static.

JLC: What early projects might surprise viewers now?

MS: In 1974, I installed *Fire-Laundry* above a street in Rome. It consisted of non-flammable material suspended from electrical lines, a “curtain” that slowly heated and then ignited. When Ivan Karp showed it at OK Harris the next year, we simulated the burning, with a fake electrical box and an electronic music soundtrack of crackling flames. The first time Ivan sold a piece of mine, he said, “You can have all the money; you need this.” And he was right. My sixth and last show there happened in 2014.



Yellow Hook, 1972. Slumped glass and metal, 11 x 9 x 3 in. Photo: Jay Langfitt

JLC: Other surprises?

MS: In 1979, Nicolas Africano and I were the first artists-in-residence at Pilchuk Glass School, and I began experimenting with glass threads, fusing them to large-scale sheets of Vitrolite. This resulted in gestural surfaces that I called the “Blue Rider” series, in homage to Kandinsky. I was layering colored glass as if with a painter’s hand.

Then in 1993, at the American Craft Museum [now the Museum of Arts and Design], my installation *Point of View* consisted of fiber optic filaments timed to glow in random sequences. I wanted viewers to feel as if they’d walked into a living drawing and were then enclosed in a circle of light. That same year, I produced several outdoor works of stone and steel. One incorporated remnants of bricks from the edge of the Bethlehem melting furnace.

And later, for “Light-Catchers,” I balanced undulating plate glass on individual chromed elements that resemble mathematical symbols. This resulted in wall reflections even more three-dimensional than the

works themselves.

JLC: And what about your conceptual pieces?

MS: When I exhibited at Murray State University in 1977, I wanted students to think about breaking traditions, so we dug a trough, filled it with water, and drove a car into it. In effect, the “puddle” was the “pedestal” for a machine of 30,000 carefully crafted parts, a sculpture for our time. This became performance when students took turns in the driver’s seat and had to put up with hecklers passing by.

At the university art gallery, I filled a dark, hushed room with rows of gooseneck lamps, each illuminating a clear pouch that held someone’s memento of a personal loss. “In Memory Of” (the project’s title) included a mother’s glasses and a father’s dental tool. I realized that the space resembled a graveyard as well as an airport landing field.

JLC: Could you describe the “In Frame” series?

MS: When I hung glass elements within metal structures, I was paying some homage to Giacometti, who let a nose jut out of an open box. For *House*, a commission for a new couple, I suspended two different but equal pieces of slumped glass from a horse bit. In a much larger piece, the paired glass hangs above an open steel base, implying a healthy relationship—two people committed yet free.



Wall Wave, 1997. Slumped glass, bronze, 71 x 20 x 33 in. Photo: Dan Morse

JLC: What was your thinking with the “Inversions” series?

MS: These are paired works of nearly identical forms. I match the cast and fabricated bronze to slumped glass forms to create mirror images—sometimes I think of metal as male and glass as female. For *Inside Light*, one form is cast iron with light pouring through apertures of glass; the other is luminous glass with embedded elements of dark metal. The metal form has the female “anima” inside, lighting up its interior, while the reflective glass shape contains a metal “animus” that’s difficult to see. This seems real to me, because women often deny their strength by redirection or by omission.

JLC: Why duality?

MS: We have two arms and two legs. Our cars are made in our image with two headlights. We have binary minds: up versus down, hot versus cold. This is our understanding, the logic of the world.

JLC: How do your social concerns surface?

MS: In 2015, for the Community Against Violence, I re-created *Don’t Break the Glass* (1994). The work came out of my childhood impulse to break the glass, to obey the words on the fire extinguisher case. I hammered a large nail through a pristine square of glass, cracking it on the wall, and this made violence visual.

I dealt with domestic violence years before. In 1987, for my MFA thesis exhibition at the University of Maryland, I created *Ode to Fiddler*, inspired by a high-profile case in which a victimized wife and children had suffered in silence. The installation consisted of 12 steel pipes, each lit from within and projecting sharp-tipped glass spikes. My daughter and I made a soundtrack of thuds and muffled gasps, because family violence is often quiet and secret.



Center Light, 1989–92. Glass, metal, and fiber optics, 52 ft. x 32 in. x 22 in. Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, Charlotte, NC. Photo: Becky Bereiter

JLC: And *Containment Field*?

MS: In 1996, for Roger Williams Park in Providence, Rhode Island, I made a 12-by-8-by-25-foot house out of penal fencing. Young offenders were being kept inside correction houses by such barriers. I allowed for vegetation to grow through an open space at the top, signaling that no matter how hard someone tries to kill the human spirit, it fights to be free.

JLC: What about the César Pelli commission?

MS: I admired this architect's work, so I was pleased to be one of five finalists, and the only woman, for the commission at his Blumenthal Performing Arts Center in Charlotte. After I won, I took several drawings to him, and he picked the one he liked. I said, "I'm not in love with it," and he replied, "You will be." We faced some engineering problems, but often the solutions came to me by morning in a coded dream. *Center Light* rises in a three-story stairwell, a 53-foot column of glass and metal, lit from within by fiber optics to imitate fireflies caught in a jar.

JLC: What are your recent projects?

MS: Before Covid, I was working on a complicated series in which I had to work closely with metal fabricators. That stopped, so I began working on what I call "Break Up"—what frozen rivers do in the spring. When I was an artist-in-residence in Fairbanks, Alaska, I saw sheets of ice push against each other with enormous force, forming incredible shapes. This series, of course, comments on climate change, something that has inspired me to run all my equipment on solar power.

JLC: Do you care that people find the work beautiful? Seductive?

MS: Glass *is* seductive. I never intended to make pretty objects, but that doesn't mean I don't find some of my work beautiful. Light was a magical subject when I painted, but working with glass lets me hold light in my hands.

Behind the Curtain: The Glass Art of Mary Shaffer (*Schiffer Publishing*), with a foreword by Jane Adlin and commentary from Lucy Lippard and William Warmus, is [available now](#).
