

On/Upon Reflection with Susan Edgerley

BY DIANE CHARBONNEAU

Who is Susan Edgerley, the 2019 recipient of the Saidye Bronfman Award?

Fresh out of Sheridan College's School of Craft and Design in 1984, she finds herself at the forefront of the Canadian Studio Glass movement during an historic transition of creative freedom, setting her path with mixed-media sculptures instead of vessels, and aligning herself with the glassworks of her contemporaries Irene Frolic and Kevin Lockau. Her singular approach arises from the soul, her inner core, unrelentingly feminine, yet with a deep concern with universal themes, existential questions, and the passage of time. Making is intuitive, exploratory, and without catering to market pressure. She experiments with various glass techniques—kiln and sand cast glass, slumped glass, flameworked glass—all in tune with her innovative manipulation, trial and error process, and poetic perception of the matter. The combination of glass with other materials such as metal, paper, and wood skilfully enhances the materiality of her sculptural projects, and more recently her installations. Her artworks take form through metaphorical series: *Les Berceuses* (1984), *Fleeting Glimpses and Storytellers* (1985-1987), *The Scarecrow* (1988-1993), *Poupées* (1991), *Seed Sower* (1994-2001). Since 2000, her pieces are grouped loosely under a spiritual entity titled *Ethereal*.

Susan Edgerley's visual language is the quintessential sum of her life experiences: from learning French, to living with a great partner, and at times collaborator, master glass caster Donald Robertson. Other significant events include: the birth of their daughter, Léa; mourning the deaths of her parents, and of cherished friends François Houdé and his partner Claude; or simply walking through her garden in the Laurentians.

Begging with a traditional family upbringing in Québec (arriving from Toronto at the age of 2), with an engineer father and an intuitively artistic mother who surrounds their home with

beautifully designed objects, and introduces her two children to the arts. Edgerley's decision-making abilities come from her father's motto: *finish what you start*. She learns the significance of paying attention to details during a CEGEP career degree at John-Abbot College in Dental Hygiene. Simultaneously, the spiritual dimension of her practice—"a way of being, rather than only a way of doing something"—takes root in the midst of her philosophy and literature classes where she familiarises herself with Gaston Bachelard's works on poetics, and hones her composition skills; she begins to write poetry. An avid reader of current fiction, she finds intellectual nourishment through books suggested by friends and family. The contemporary art scene captivates her, especially feeling in tune with the works of Anish Kapoor and Magdalena Abakanowicz, that are inspirational to her studio practice.

Her appreciation of glass emerges from her interest in ceramics in high school; and she explores clay as a medium in her first year at Sheridan College. The generosity of her mentors, such as professors Dan Crichton and Peter Keogh, as well as François Houdé later on, was seminal to her training as a sculptor; their encouragement to pursue her chosen course—sculpture, and to build a sense of community—is notorious. She embraces eagerly this latter notion—a sought after mentor herself—through her commitment to teaching at different institutions, including Espace VERRE in Montréal, and her remarkable contribution to its Fusion workshop for 25 years.

Susan Edgerley and I recently sat down to discuss her career and achievements. During our two recent meetings, she told me stories of how she became a responsive artist with the power to make us understand that "the essence of life is not 'a feeling of being, of existence, but a feeling of participation'".¹ As a result of our preliminary conversations, I looked for quotes to express and structure my responses to her narrative, and for an opportunity for further exchange.

LEFT Susan Edgerley, *Inside the Sky*, 2016. glass, 304 cm x 152 cm x 152 cm. COURTESY OF SUSAN EDGERLEY





ABOVE Susan Edgerley, Installation—*In an ethereal moment* (left), *From the One* (middle), *Night Pool* (suspended right), 2016. Flameworked, sandcast and kiln worked glass, metal, wood, 300 cm x 300 cm x 20 cm. COURTESY OF SUSAN EDGERLEY

RIGHT Susan Edgerley, *From the One*, 2002. Sandcast glass, metal and wood, 214 cm x 110 cm x 16 cm. COURTESY OF SUSAN EDGERLEY

DIANE CHARBONNEAU

There is an undeniable spirituality ingrained in your pieces, which is bound to your view on the existence of an individual within a community. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard states: "It would seem, then, that it is through their 'immensity' that these two kinds of space—the space of intimacy and world space—blend. When human solitude deepens, then the two immensities touch and become identical [...] This coexistence of things in a space to which we add consciousness of our own existence, is a very concrete thing."²

SUSAN EDGERLEY

It is in our very humanity where we find our commonality, our universal search for understanding and purpose. The multiple connections we discover within ourselves, within others, and in the world that surrounds us, ultimately intersect to create meaning, or as Bachelard states, "touch and become identical". Connection and communion are at the very heart of existence. The spiritual and the metaphysical entwine in our search for truth. These intersections are the spaces where art is created. The longer I pause to reflect, the more I have discovered a clarity, a unity within myself and a deep connection to the world. This personal vision informs my work and my creative process.

DC

The intuitive nature of your artistic approach brings us to a statement by French-Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson: "Intuition is a method of feeling one's way intellectually into the inner heart of a thing to locate what is unique and inexpressible in it."³

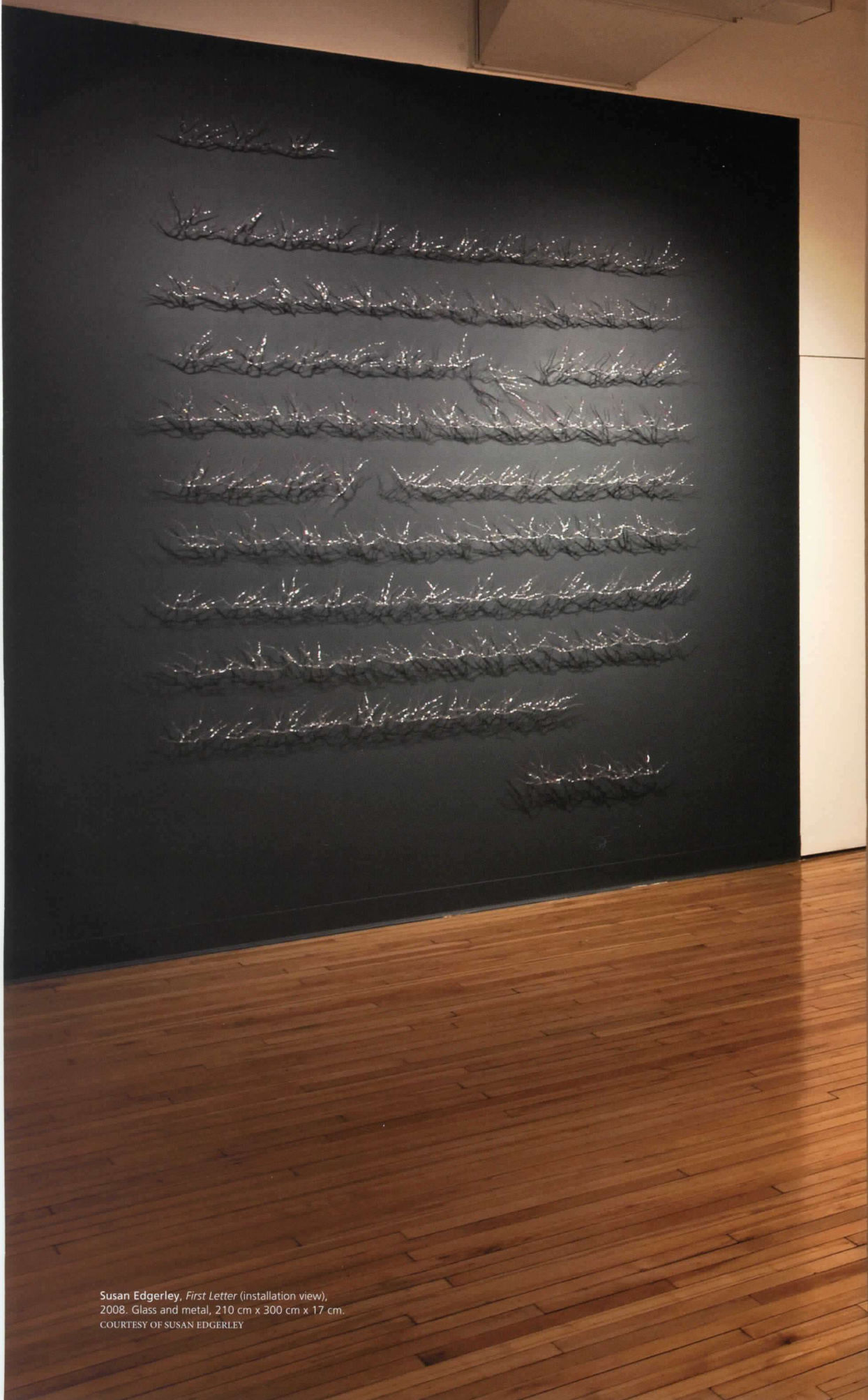
SE

Intuition is a guide, intangible, impossible to fully grasp, or clearly perceive. It never offers definitive answers, yet can lead to profound insight. Over the years, I have grown to trust it as a creative collaborator. It never presents as factual knowledge nor does it offer clear direction. Primal and knowing, it is deeply seated in the body. In my work, it nudges me, by either challenging or confirming. Integrating this intuitive sense into my thinking and creative process has led me towards innovation and discovery. It has become a partner, helping frame my understanding of the world and creating resonance in my work and life.

DC

Developing an idea through matter and process is a driving force of your practice. Here is a thought drawn from the French art historian Henri Focillon in *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934): "This is because matter, even in its most minute details, is always structure and activity, that is to say, form, and because the more we delimit the field of metamorphoses, the better do we understand both the intensity and the graph of the movements of this field".⁴





Susan Edgerley, *First Letter* (installation view),
2008. Glass and metal, 210 cm x 300 cm x 17 cm.
COURTESY OF SUSAN EDGERLEY



ABOVE Susan Edgerley, *The Journey* (wall) and *Syncopation* (floor), 2018. Glass and metal. COURTESY OF SUSAN EDGERLEY

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In my practice, the exploration of material is fundamental. Beginning with an idea, it is through making and materials that I discover the language I will use to visually articulate the content. Ideas are enriched and transformed through process. When I begin a new series, a question is asked. I often reach for techniques that I have not previously explored. By starting anew, the idea finds its own unique material language. There is a balance between knowing and unknowing to be found, opening a pathway to discovery. In this intensity where reflection, observation and intuition are paramount, the idea truly takes hold and begins to form. This is but a first step. Once material language and techniques have been confirmed, the idea now has physicality. Attention begins to shift to other areas where more questions arise. Multiples, composition, installation techniques, relationships to space all have complex processes with equivalent demands. Process is then understood as a continuous loop, connecting back into itself, with infinite points of entry.

DC

A quote by the British sculptor Anish Kapoor resonates with onlookers' responses to your artworks: "There is something imminent in the work, but the circle is only completed by the viewer".⁵

SE

In my current series of installations, perception is suspended between materiality and impermanence, the known and the unknown. The works are complex in their multiplicity, scale and unconventional use of material. They are experiential and have

many subtleties and inherent paradoxes. The dialogue is activated through personal discovery, interaction and nuanced perception. Experienced intimately, they create wonder and amazement. To be fully understood, they require presence.

Decades ago, in my first art history class, we saw hundreds of images of artworks, including a water lily series by Monet. The following year, in an unexpected encounter, I experienced those paintings. Stunned by the monumental scale, colour and gestural power of the work, in that moment I understood that by simply 'seeing' and therefore 'knowing' a work, was not its truth. Art is the dialogue found in the intimate experience of the full creative vision of the artist. With nothing standing between us, together in that moment, we completed the 'circle', changing everything. ■

(Endnotes)

1. Anna Teresa Tymieniecka, *Phenomenology and Science* quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Maria Jolas trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) xvi f.1.
2. Bachelard 203.
3. Quoted in Britta Benke, *Georgia O'Keefe, 1887-1986: Flowers in the Desert*, (Köln: Taschen, 2000) 28.
4. Henri Focillon, 'Forms in the Realms of Matter', from *The Life of Forms in Art*, in Adamson, Glenn, ed., *The Craft Reader*, (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2010) 361.
5. Aylin Öney Tan, "Yellow Yelp", *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 06, 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/yellow-yelp-60567>, website consulted 30/01/19.