

Balancing Act

Rich in concept and feeling, **Susan Edgerley**'s work reconciles the world of gendered opposites, finding equanimity in her equal embrace of the traditionally feminine and masculine, the emotional and rational.

BY ANA MATISSE DONEFER-HICKIE



Unfurl (from the "Ethereal" series),
2008. Glass. H 60, W 90, D 5 in.
PHOTO: MICHEL DUBREUIL



Fetish (from the “Scarecrow” series), 1991. Glass, wood, nails, paint. H 73, W 27, D 13.
PHOTO: MICHEL DUBREUIL

Fetish (1991), a piece from Susan Edgerley’s early “Scarecrow” series—finished the year I was born—has always both resisted and comforted me. It stands sentinel over the entryway in my childhood home, a massive construction of reclaimed doors and nails topped by two thin supports carrying an upturned crescent of sheet glass and fused metal. Both familiar—it is a constant presence in my early memories—and strange, its form hints at human figuration and yet remains stubbornly inaccessible; the piece is both protective and delicate, prickly and sensuous, dualities common in Edgerley’s thinking as an artist.

Susan is my mother’s best friend; she and her artwork are entwined in my early memories, and our conversations about glass, art, and life have shaped my thinking as much as any class

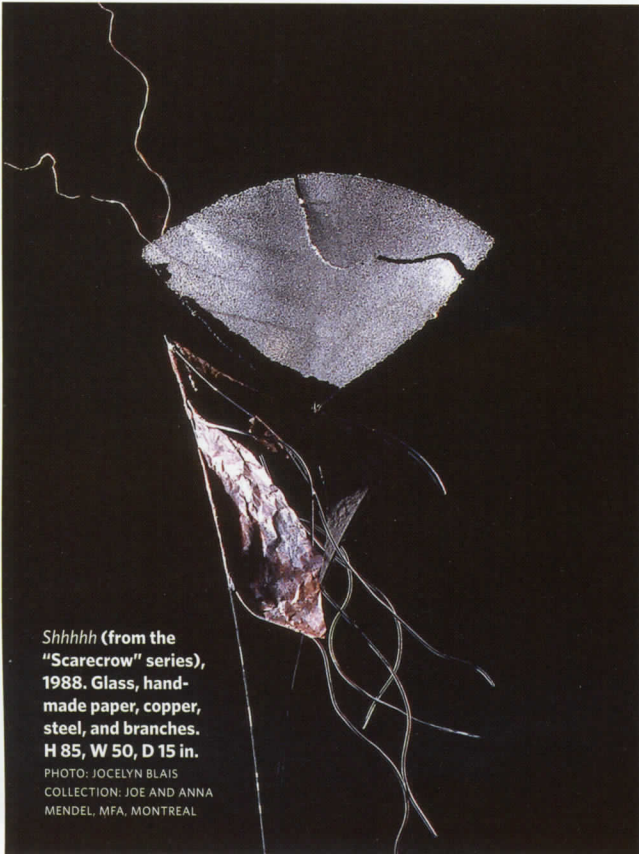
on the history of art. While emotional connection is often cast in opposition to intellectual interest, my relationship to Sue and her work has always been informed by both. Thus, it is a pleasure and an honor to contribute an analysis of my friend’s considerable oeuvre on the occasion of her receipt this year of the Saidye Bronfman Award, presented by the Canada Council for the Arts for excellence in the fine crafts.

Over her 38-year career, Edgerley has contributed her personal vision to the Canadian glass community as a teacher, board member and president, organizer, program director, and a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art. But her most lasting, interesting, and innovative contribution is her vision as an artist—and her body of work, which deftly balances the realms of idea and technical expression and remains one of the richest in the field of contemporary glass today.

Edgerley has always been interested in using the possibilities of glass practice for her conceptual explorations. Studying at Sheridan College in the early 1980s, she began to develop the central theme that has come to define her oeuvre: the productive tension of equal dualities and the boundless opportunities found in attempts at their reconciliation. The way she treated this theme in her early work—which is personal, tender, and embodied—resonates clearly with the concerns of artists working in glass today.

The “Scarecrow” series, her most ambitious work from the 1980s and early 90s, exteriorizes the complex internal

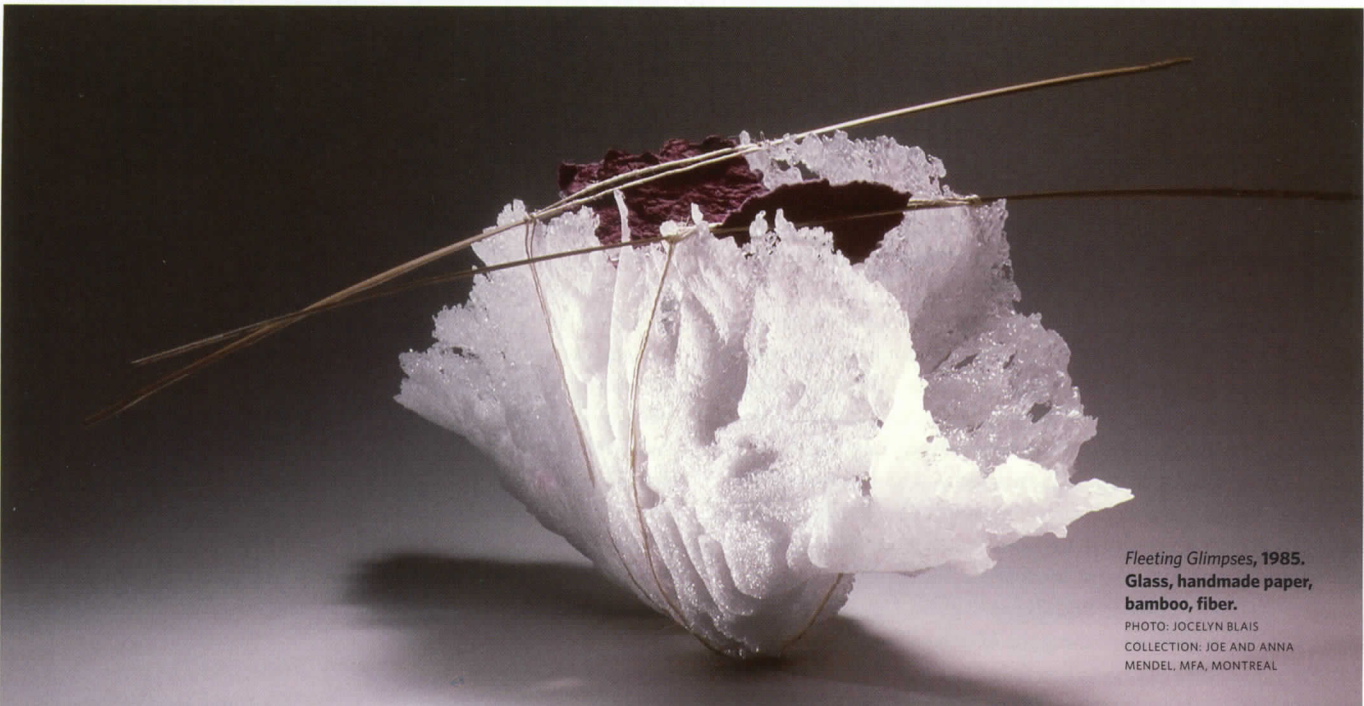
tension of navigating one’s identity in a culture that insists on gendered opposites: feminine/masculine equated with soft/hard, fragile/strong, emotional/rational. In *Shhhhh* (1988), a large fractured piece of lacy, delicate fused frit hovers over a cascade of waving branches and dark wrinkled paper, held aloft only by thin steel rods. Edgerley has juxtaposed the ethereal white glass with a beaten sheet of copper and dark, taut homemade paper, opposites that still are necessary for understanding the other. In her combination of glass, handmade paper, copper, steel, and wood in this unexpected form, she evokes the feeling of tense balance required to negotiate the various aspects of identity associated with their aesthetic characteristics: Tough steel is rendered tender with sensuous lines, while the dominant visual and formal



Shhhhh (from the "Scarecrow" series), 1988. Glass, handmade paper, copper, steel, and branches. H 85, W 50, D 15 in.
 PHOTO: JOCELYN BLAIS
 COLLECTION: JOE AND ANNA MENDEL, MFA, MONTREAL

element—the glass—is simultaneously delicate, brittle, and strong. A physically large—and, like *Fetish*, faintly figural—piece, the effect of *Shhhhh* is nevertheless intimate: a simultaneously confrontational and vulnerable look into a personal struggle with identity.

The centrality of thought and feeling in Edgerley's work is matched by her engagement with her chosen material. Her ideas have led her deeper into the material at every turn in her artistic development. Devoted to the latent potential in glass to materialize immaterial themes, she initially approached glass because of its potential for a fresh visual language: "the capacity of the material had not been limited by the over-articulation of conceptual art. I didn't want to make objects and glass gave me freedom to explore—it provided an unfinished visual language full of potential" (private communication, March 24, 2019). Indeed, it was only in the early 1980s, while Edgerley was learning the material's possibilities herself, that artists who had not begun in glass—such as Lynda Benglis, James Turrell, and Christopher Wilmarth—approached Studio Glass to capitalize on the versatile visual vocabulary glass offered (see Martha Drexler Lynn, *American Studio Glass: 1960-1990*, 117). For Edgerley, the flexibility of glass provided an opening for thematic exploration, and her affinity with it is clear—an almost supra-natural ability to harness its properties in the articulation of her thoughts and feelings. "Glass is an alive material, you have to feel your way to find the true moment. It will do what it wants and you have to understand the material to let it be itself" (private communication, March 24, 2019).



Fleeting Glimpses, 1985. Glass, handmade paper, bamboo, fiber.
 PHOTO: JOCELYN BLAIS
 COLLECTION: JOE AND ANNA MENDEL, MFA, MONTREAL



From the "Poupées" series, 1991.

PHOTO: JOCELYN BLAIS
COLLECTION: JOE AND ANNA MENDEL,
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, MONTREAL

From crinkly fused frit, to glowing veined slumped plaques, to sandcast pods and lampworked tendrils, Edgerley handles the material confidently, coaxing from it the dynamic qualities that best capture each thought—a perfect compromise between the early Studio Glass dreams of Littleton and Labino (Lynn, 87-88). Fragile yet enduring, brittle yet strong, glass serves her as material with built-in metaphor: The duality of glass seems a part of its very nature, its state somewhere between liquid and solid, and its visual expression varying from rough and heavy to ethereally light and translucent.

Edgerley has always worked in discrete series, the movements between each chapter of her oeuvre meticulously considered. In the early "Les Berceuses," "Fleeting Glimpses," "Poupées," and "Scarecrow" series, unified by her use of similar materials, her focus was inward: the delicate and consistently negotiated balance of existing within a human mind and body rendered in glass and metal. These series explore internality, fragility, balance, strength, and the pressure of expectation, deftly evoking these precarious states with metal, wire, wood, and predominantly white or translucent fused and slumped glass. One of the "Poupées" from 1991, a spinning top of rusted barbed wire cradled between two cones of crystalline fused frit, simultaneously reveals and conceals a secretive interior, which, though visible

between the glass, is made inaccessible by the tines of barbed wire. The glass looks fragile but is also used as the primary structural element of the top, emphasizing the risks inherent in the playfulness invited by the piece's form. What if the glass crumbles and something is accidentally revealed? The works in these four series revel in the tension between secret and laid bare, a cohesive and personal sculptural vision that captures the essence of the artist's powerful ideas again and again.

In 1994 she began a new avenue of inquiry with the "Seed Sower" series. While it maintained a dedication to the potential to reconcile forces that traditionally oppose, this group of works brings it outward, focusing less on private negotiations and more on communal concerns through experimentation with pod-like shapes, the formal relationship between mass and sinuous line, and multiple articulations of similar form. The early installations in this series, the first identifiable versions of a piece called *From the One* that Edgerley continued to re-articulate throughout the 1990s, are particularly magnetic, small gatherings of variations in sandcast glass sprouting inclusions of copper wire that reiterate the productive potential of a single form. Each discrete sliver is rendered in rusty orange sandcast glass, the solidity and heft of which evokes the visceral beginnings of vegetal life in the earth. Later, in the 1990s, these forms multiplied and condensed. The

later versions of *From the One* present a powerful phalanx of vesicae piscis, liberated from their interlocking circles and cradling more complex copper inclusions. The interdependence of the distinct elements of these pieces underscores the relationship between individual and community: Each pointed oval is unique in the design of its copper inclusions, but the true power of the piece lies in the emotional impact of their assembly on the wall.

Expansions in her concept for “Seed Sowers” involved an equal evolution in her methods of expressing it in glass. *From the One* and other early pieces from the series focus on concrete potentiality, the multiple articulations of similar organic forms expressing the myriad possibilities latent in seeds and eggs. At the end of the 1990s, Susan progressed this imagery of growth and unity in variety with subtle additions of sensual lampworked elements in transparent glass. The first of these, *With/Within/Without* from 1998, maintains the pointed oval forms she established for the series—this time rendered in transparent wheel-cut glass, the pocked interiors of which remind one of rapidly dividing cells—but adds, in place of the more rooted copper wire, delicate sprays of transparent lampworked glass. These later pieces express potentiality in feeling rather than in form; the addition of grasping lampworked tendrils introduces a sense of longing, evoking rather than expressing the sense of possibility in an as-yet-unexplored future.

By 2014, these ideas were ready to carry a new series, and their expression had migrated almost entirely to lampworked glass. Her next—and current—series, called “Ethereal,” expands the consideration of time introduced in those later “Seed Sower” pieces; as she has said, “usually as one series feels like it is reaching its end, I start the one that has been simmering, and they naturally overlap. But ‘Seed Sowers’ and ‘Ethereal’ seemed to meld together for quite a while even though the techniques were quite different, as were the principal concepts” (private communication, June 9, 2019). With “Ethereal,” Edgerley takes a further step out from the personal work of her earlier series and the communal work of “Seed Sowers,” probing metaphysical questions about the essential dichotomies and correspondences we see deeply latent

in the natural world. They are meditations on the cyclicity of life and death, two essential opposites that are nevertheless inextricably joined in the human experience and, as such, they leave the organic formal language of “Seed Sowers” in favor of a more subtle gestural vocabulary. The majority of the pieces in the “Ethereal” series are large wall installations of small transparent lampworked components pinned in spiral choreography and sometimes including graceful touches of color. These pieces contain multitudes in their simplicity, composed of not only the made object but its



From the One (from the “Seed Sowers” series), 1998. Wall installation of sandcast glass, copper. H 77, W 35, D 5 in. PHOTO: MICHEL DUBREUIL

Inside the Sky (from the
"Ethereal" series), 2016.
Suspended work in glass.
H 120, W 60, D 60 in.
PHOTO: MICHEL DUBREUIL



effect on the world around it as well; the shadows cast by these delicate lampworked forms are as much a part of the piece as the glass itself.

This willingness to adapt her use of the material to the development of her thought has given Edgerley yet another pairing of opposites to explore; for the majority of her career, she has quietly straddled the rocky divide between the world of glass art and that of contemporary art more broadly. Having found commercial and critical success with the "Seed Sower" series, her development in 2014 from the rough sandcast surfaces of pieces like *From the One* to the lampworked tendrils that dominate the "Ethereal" series caused a rupture in her career. "My approach to the material," she

explains, "was more in line with the art world than with the glass world at the time" (private communication, March 24, 2019). During the 1990s and early 2000s, much of Studio Glass in Canada was still focused primarily on technical proficiency with a single style or technique. Rather than pursuing mastery of the material—which for Edgerley infers an element of dominance that she rejects—she adapts it to her pursuit of emotional, intellectual, and artistic expression. While the "Ethereal" series was readily accepted in the wider world of Canadian contemporary art, the circle of glass collectors previously interested in her work felt keenly her switch to a different principal technique. As she shifted formats, the demographics of her collectors changed, and she

began selling to those focused on contemporary art, designing site-specific architectural commissions and installing work in museum collections, such as that of the Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec and now the Canadian Museum of History. Like her work, Susan Edgerley's career is a reminder that things we often separate into disparate or even opposing categories can in practice bleed easily together.

As much as Edgerley's interests have evolved over the course of her career, some themes weave through every series. Appropriate to her interest in cyclicity, with her current work in the "Ethereal" series she has continued to explore ideas introduced in her early work, albeit more confidently and with a more refined visual language. My mother, Laura Donefer, has written of her friend: "Susan has taken specific moments out of living that much later on I recognize in her sculptures, and sometimes this acknowledgement of a shared experience takes my breath away." These attempts to make cursory moments permanent are as present in the "Fleeting Glimpses" series of the mid-1980s as they are in her ongoing "Ethereal" installations. Combining layers of crystalline glass and earthy handmade paper that invert the viewers' expectations of the materials, the pieces in "Fleeting Glimpses" are so finely balanced they seem impossible, rendering stable precarious compositions. Edgerley returns to this attempt—and to the use of fused frit—in *Inside the Sky*. Composed of fused frit disks reminiscent of drowsy heads of Queen Anne's lace delicately suspended above a polished black platform, this piece is an ethereal attempt to capture those inarticulable moments that are both familiar and radically strange.

Like *Fetish*, I know Susan and yet I do not. She has been in my life for as long as I can remember, a constant presence and a source of measured advice. As an early maternal figure and later a friend, she has always supported me. Until now, however, I had not given

her work the attention and analysis it so deserves, and so had not understood the boundless thought and skill behind it. Though segmented into her six series, over the course of her career Susan's work has returned again and again to the reconciliation of supposed opposites, a dedication to expression in glass that has placed her at the center of glass and art in Canada for the past 30 years. As an artist, both in the work she creates and the space she occupies, she is like a fulcrum, preserving a tenuous balance between opposites of equal strength. ■

A research associate at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, ANA MATISSE DONEFER-HICKIE is currently assisting with an exhibition on the intersections of art, science and technology, and entertainment in early-modern court culture. She holds an MA from the Bard Graduate Center in the history of decorative arts, design, and material culture, where her qualifying paper on the private glass workshop of Archduke Ferdinand II won the 2017 Clive Wainwright Award.



Susan Edgerley with wall works from her "Ethereal" series.

PHOTOS: MICHEL DUBREUIL

