

glass

Antoine Leperlier's

Glass Menagerie

Like precious gems, Antoine Leperlier's intricate, finely wrought glassworks are shimmering, sumptuous objects in vivid blues, pearly grays, and browns. Both classical and fantastic, these luminous sculptures combine pure geometric forms with objects that give the illusion of having been excavated from an archeological dig—half-buried urns, decanters and vases, mythological figures, masks, torsos, even fragments of inscriptions on what looks like stone. At once delicate and compact, these works communicate the paradox inherent in glass's dual qualities of fragility and strength.

The 44-year-old Leperlier, one of France's most distinguished glass artists, applies his studies as a painter and sculptor to artisanal craft. In so doing he proudly upholds the tradition of artists like Cellini and Dürer, the former distinguished by his impeccable goldsmithing, the latter by his engraving skills. Leperlier learned his craft from his grandfather, François Décorchemont (1880–1971), an Art Deco artist renowned for his decorative vases and stained-glass windows, who invited the 15-year-old Leperlier to apprentice in his atelier in Conches.

He worked with his grandfather for several years, during which time he was trained in what is known as *pâte de verre*. Literally meaning "glass dough" and sometimes called kiln casting, this ancient method involves mixing ground glass and glue into a paste and then heating it in a mold. It results in an opaque glass quite distinct from blown glass.

One of the few artists to revive and specialize in this technique after the turn of the century, Décorchemont was inspired by his friendship with the Impressionists to invent an important formula for a translucent *pâte de verre* that emphasized light and color. On his grandfather's death, Leperlier inherited the studio and engaged in research that eventually led him to make further technical innovations.

Pâte de verre is an exacting and, at times, painstakingly slow technique, so much so that Leperlier makes no more

than five smallish objects a month. "It's a very slight number for a *verrier* [glass artist]," he explains, adding that glassblowers can do about 100 in the same time period.

Yet despite his strong attachment to craftsmanship and tradition, Leperlier is also a maverick. His artistic concerns go far beyond technique and connect with much of what is happening in contemporary art. In short, the essence of Leperlier's work lies in the diversity of ideas that inform it. He has a philosophy degree from the Sorbonne and peppers conversations about his work with references



Manet's Tombstone is typical of the way Antoine Leperlier recaptures the past through a delicacy of association while paying homage to earlier masters in a different medium.

to Kant and Adorno, Baudelaire and Apollinaire.

In Leperlier's hands, glass becomes a kind of Proustian medium that offers a way to recapture the past through a delicacy of association; it is also an interrupted hourglass, a metaphor for the operation of memory. His objects are fragile but potent weapons against loss. "Fixing our memories and observations in glass is my way to undo their evanescence, to stop them from fleeing. *Pâte de verre* literally creates a 'heated freezing' of the work in different states. The works are meant to awaken consciousness of memories caught like a shipwreck on the ice," he says, adding a cryptic quotation from Marcel Duchamp: "I mean time in space."

Leperlier is sensitive to light's transience, but he captures and holds it. His series "Simultaneous Shadows" makes phantoms materialize. These ghosts contain both a three-dimensional object (a flask, for instance) and its reflection, which appears as another solid version of the object buried in the density of the

glass. And to the viewer's eye, these "shadows" are often bent and distorted. "I try to deform the glass during the cooking, to emphasize that a memory of something can never be its exact replica," Leperlier explains.

One work in the series is a good example of the artist's method—*Manet's Tombstone*, a transparent, three-dimensional depiction of a Manet still life of asparagus. Leperlier recasts the decomposing vegetables, already captured for eternity on canvas, in cold, hard glass, along with their shadow. Here, the artist offers up his version of the traditional theme of "vanitas." He inscribes the piece with the Latin phrase used by Poussin for his painting *Et in Arcadia ego* ("I too was in Arcadia"), a phrase that expresses the inevitability of death. The ancient words later appear in a dozen more works from the artist's hand.

Another series has several pieces incorporating the truncated white shape from Dürer's *Melancholia*. A third series borrows and revises the image of a Pompeiian calco—the cast of a body buried in Mount Vesuvius's ashes—by taking the figure's imprint and making it three-dimensional. These works exploit the resonance of Leperlier's materials and their relationship to the elements (a flesh-and-blood being covered by earth is transformed by fire into a sort of stable version of ice). The artist's newest works, shown at the "Open Glass" show in Venice last fall, unite mythology and archeology in images of ancient masks. The background contains an excerpt from Dante's *Inferno* that, according to the artist, describes "frozen souls." Buried in glass and nearly invisible, the words have nearly the same effect as a whisper.

Leperlier's sculptures attract a wide range of collectors, not only throughout France and the United States but in Switzerland, Japan, Korea, the Czech Republic, and Mexico. One fan "turned out to be a highly significant collector of primitive art," Leperlier remembers, "and my work was the only contemporary piece he'd ever purchased. When I later met him at the gallery, he said he found my work highly mystical, like a religious or cult object." Borrowing from the ages, these are works that belong to them, as well.

Laurie Attias