

Catalog Essay: Carolyn Healy & John Phillips – “Splendor in the Glass”

John Phillips and Carolyn Healy are known for their virtuoso multi-sensory environments, which inhabit and respond to spaces with precise, densely layered interactions of physical materials, video, light and sound. Their complementary working process, involving Healy’s defining a given space with arrangements of found objects, and Phillips’ developing videos and sound, results in installations that put the viewer inside a disarmingly rich, open-ended experiential tableau.

While they have created work in a range of spaces, from galleries and theatrical stages to a shopping mall in China — one of the first digital multimedia installations to be shown there — Healy and Phillips have gravitated to transitional or abandoned spaces, whose previous history offers a grounding of trenchant details, whether of architecture or objects, that will stamp the piece with its meaning. These have ranged from a small-scale piece constructed in an unused elevator shaft (“Synopera,” 2002) to “Residual Signal,” their most recent work, taking over the massive inner dome of the Rotunda, an unrestored former Christian Science church in Philadelphia. Their approach has progressively developed muscle and flexibility, allowing them to engage spaces with their own distinct, resonant histories and eloquent detritus.

Some of their strongest recent work has come out of this kind of deep drilling into the history and character of old industrial spaces. In “Running True,” Healy and Phillips took over an unused building at Disston Saw Works, a company dating back to 1840, as part of *Hidden City Philadelphia*. Deploying old tools, equipment, maps and drawings, the artists created a surreal environment, almost frightening in its evocation of the sounds, materials and sheer power involved in this industrial process. “Indigo Hunting,” part of the exhibit *Catagenesis* at the huge abandoned factory complex housing the Globe Dye Works in Philadelphia, used scavenged rolls of dyed threads; repurposed pipes and wooden cable spools; video evoking the talismanic indigo dye color; and the sound of a voice intoning a myriad of color names, to create an insistent, compelling immersion in the place. In each of these works, visitors were given a space transformed and dematerialized, in which a building seems to dream about its former life.

Projects like this have meant the addition of another labor-intensive step—the quasi-archeological work of going through back rooms, old boxes and forgotten archives, looking for telling finds: those found objects and documents that truly tell their histories, adding narrative texture to now empty or near-empty spaces. Wheaton’s *Emanations* exhibit offered an opportunity to the artists to take on another industrial process, with its own distinctive history. WheatonArts is an outgrowth of the Wheaton Glass Company, founded in 1888 (a successor company, Wheaton Industries, now produces glass and plastic products). Wheaton Glass made Millville, New Jersey the national center for glass manufacturing, supplying the country with prescription bottles, and later lab glass, food and drink containers, and much more.

The artists settled into an informal, months-long residency, different from that afforded to artists and fellows in glassmaking. Healy began by digging through the troves of old objects amassed at Wheaton, not only from Wheaton Glass, but those given as gifts by individuals and other glass producers here and around the country. The two artists plunged into their surroundings. They interacted with resident glass artists, and absorbed the process of glassmaking in the studio, from the creation of molten glass in the “glory hole” to its painstaking and arduous shaping, to its cooling in the annealing ovens.

For their project, they chose the Schoolhouse, a freestanding historic structure on Wheaton’s grounds, separate from the Museum of American Glass building. Viewers enter into an enclosed, glass-covered vestibule, enabling them to look into the single schoolroom in three

directions. Assemblages of like objects, all culled from Wheaton's collection, present themselves around the room, offering a kind of discourse on the making of glass and the evolution of its uses. The view is anchored by several heavy ceramic crucibles, used for melting silica and other materials into glass. Around the room are bowls of blue and black cullet — sorted glass fragments for recycling into new glass pieces; lines of medicinal bottles in brown, blue and clear glass; soda bottles of frosted glass, set specimen-like inside bell jars; and an aggregation of delicately stacked roundels, the flat, nipped discs that remind us of how glass windows were first made, by cutting small panes from shapes like these. A clear curtain of hanging lab vials and pipettes stands witness to a later development in the glass industry, as do rods of neon, a long bar of optical glass, a windshield and more.

The schoolhouse itself has been transformed, not only by repainting the interior in neutral hues, but also by covering the windows with film-treated glass that both filters out and reflects inward, unifying the room in a softer ambient light. The decision to allow in some daylight, a departure from the dramatic lighting contrasts of many of their installations, accomplishes many things, according to the artists: allowing the glass windows to perform their traditional function of allowing in light and views, and creating a more complex perceptual space where shadows and reflections coexist.

In effect, the schoolroom has become a semitransparent vessel itself, a crucible for contemplation. It is a place for noticing beams of reflected light that seem to hover in midair, and sunlight intersecting with an angled sheet of glass. Videos running on the three visible walls seem to reveal the inner workings of glass. The trance-like imagery was generated by shining moving light sources on and through glass objects, sometimes in extreme close-up, yielding a sense of being present inside the very chemical substance of glass, bubbling and rippling like a frozen sea.

The sonic environment echoes this, with otherworldly processed sounds sourced from Phillips' improvisational interactions with glass objects. We are brought here to the central mystery of glass: what is this material, which feels caught somewhere between solid and liquid? Its molecular structure is random, like a liquid, but the mixture of superheated silica and flux has been coaxed to take solid form without crystallizing as it cools. Its surface is hard and impermeable, yet it resembles a kind of frozen liquid. But it's not actually a supercooled liquid, as many people think — a misapprehension that speaks to its paradoxical nature — but an amorphous solid.

It is this hybrid nature that has made it not only supremely useful, but endlessly fascinating. In this dual nature of glass, Healy and Phillips have found a subject that is uniquely suited to their working method. Their work has always given viewers opposing elements to wrestle through, redefining physical objects, structures and spaces through the more evanescent elements of video, light and sound. To this, their pieces created in historic sites have added other polarities: the power of machinery versus the exacting human requirements of the manufacturing process; dying away versus remaining; remembering versus forgetting. Their school-room installation also invites us to experience the conundrums of glass directly — solid or liquid, allowing, blocking or bending light; fragile or strong — and to immerse ourselves in all these polarities without need of resolution.

—Miriam Seidel