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MYSTERIOUS NATURE

EXPLORING THE GLASS ART OF JIYONG LEE,
HARUE SHIMOMOTO, AND ROB SNYDER.

BY SUSIE J. SILBERT



“**T**ranslucency provides some sort of mystery...” explains glass artist Jiyong Lee about his choice of material. “The variation between transparency and almost opaque...[is like] the cloudiness of the future itself.” For Lee, and fellow artists Harue Shimomoto, and Rob Snyder, this essential mystery of glass—it’s evocative inscrutability—provides the impetus for works that highlight hidden aspects of the natural world. Using divergent approaches to form and technique, these artists employ the optical properties of glass to create objects that provoke contemplation and wonder at the phenomena unfolding all around us.

Geometric and structured, the frosted pieces of Lee’s *Segmentation Series* seem like a cross between a particularly complex three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle and an early 20th-century constructivist painting. Composed of individual sections of highly refractive optical glass fabricated together with tinted adhesive so each segment appears infused with a different

hue, Lee’s objects seem to glow with an internal light. Magical and magisterial, they are complex and simple at the same time, which is apt for work that is based on something as fundamental as cell division.

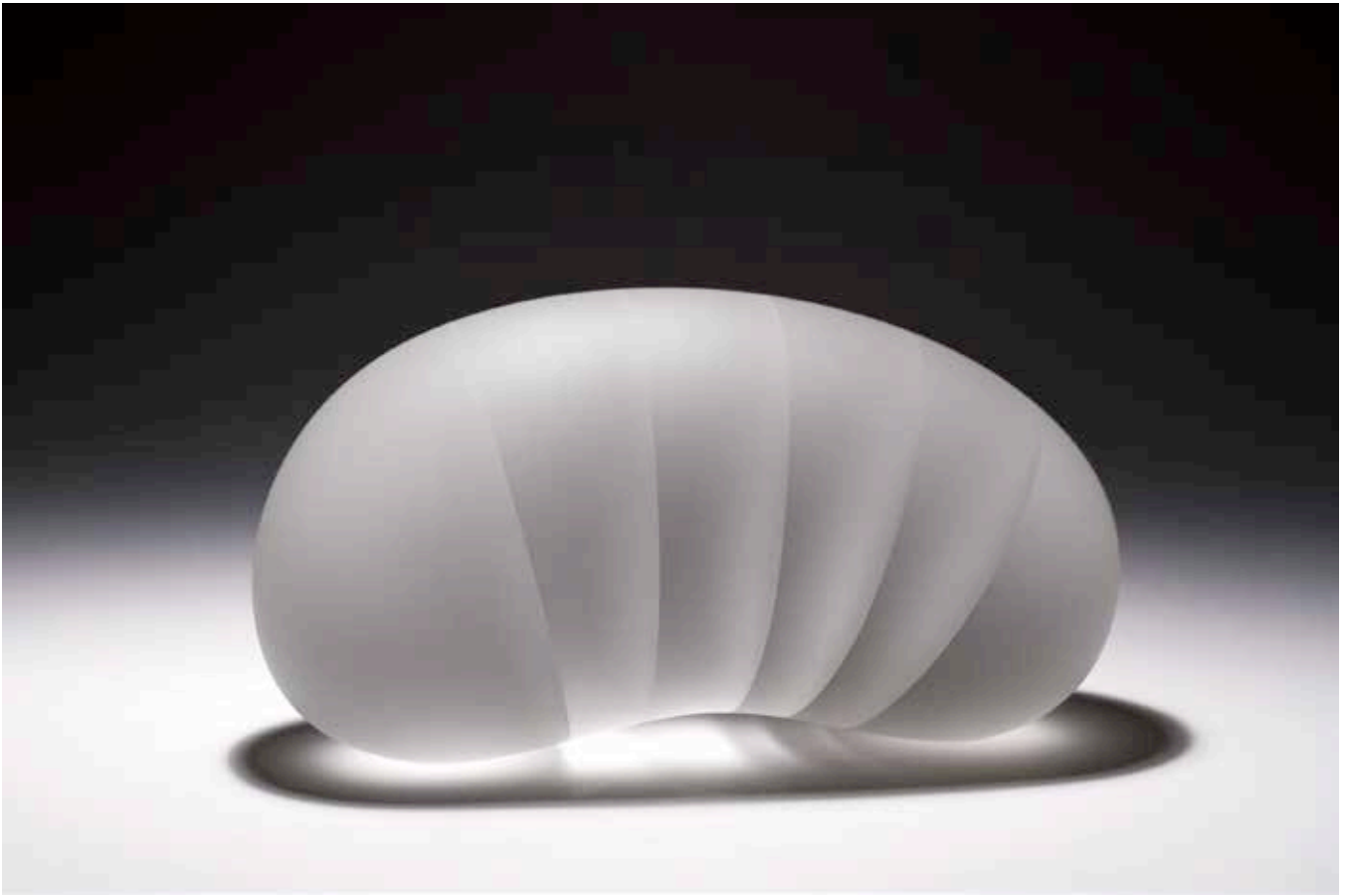
“In 2001, my son was born,” Lee explains. “And my dad is a doctor, so I had this idea when my wife was pregnant, to revisit how life starts.” Researching in biology books and on the Internet, he came across images of cells dividing. “I found them interesting and intriguing,” he says, “so I almost immediately thought, maybe I can re-create this with glass.” Beginning with an uncomplicated form cut into multiple sections, over the years his pieces have become more and more complex, as if they too are cells that have multiplied.

More than simply diagram the process of mitosis, Lee’s works elaborate the wonder of creation. “We think we know everything about the cell,” he says, “but actually, the future of the cell, we don’t fully know about. If we think of the cell [not as a scientific object]

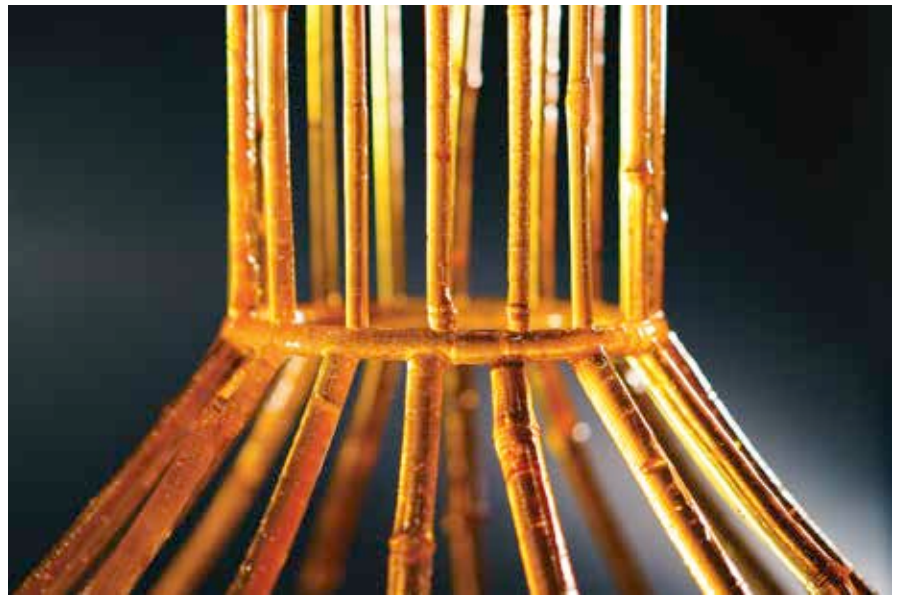
1
Jiyong Lee, *Gold-Ruby Trapezohedron*, cut, carved glass, refined surface, 9¼ x 15 x 10½".
Courtesy the artist.

2
Jiyong Lee, *White Drosophila Embryo Segmentation*, hot-worked glass, 6½ x 14½ x 5¾".
Courtesy the artist.

3
Rob Snyder, *Science*, lost branch kiln cast glass, assembled, 73 x 30 x 30".
Photo by Terry Behal.



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but as a life, we don't know what person this will be or what kind of life it will lead."

Beautiful, enigmatic and organized by a logic that seems just out of reach, Lee's pieces hint at the unknowable potential packed into even the tiniest building blocks of all living things.

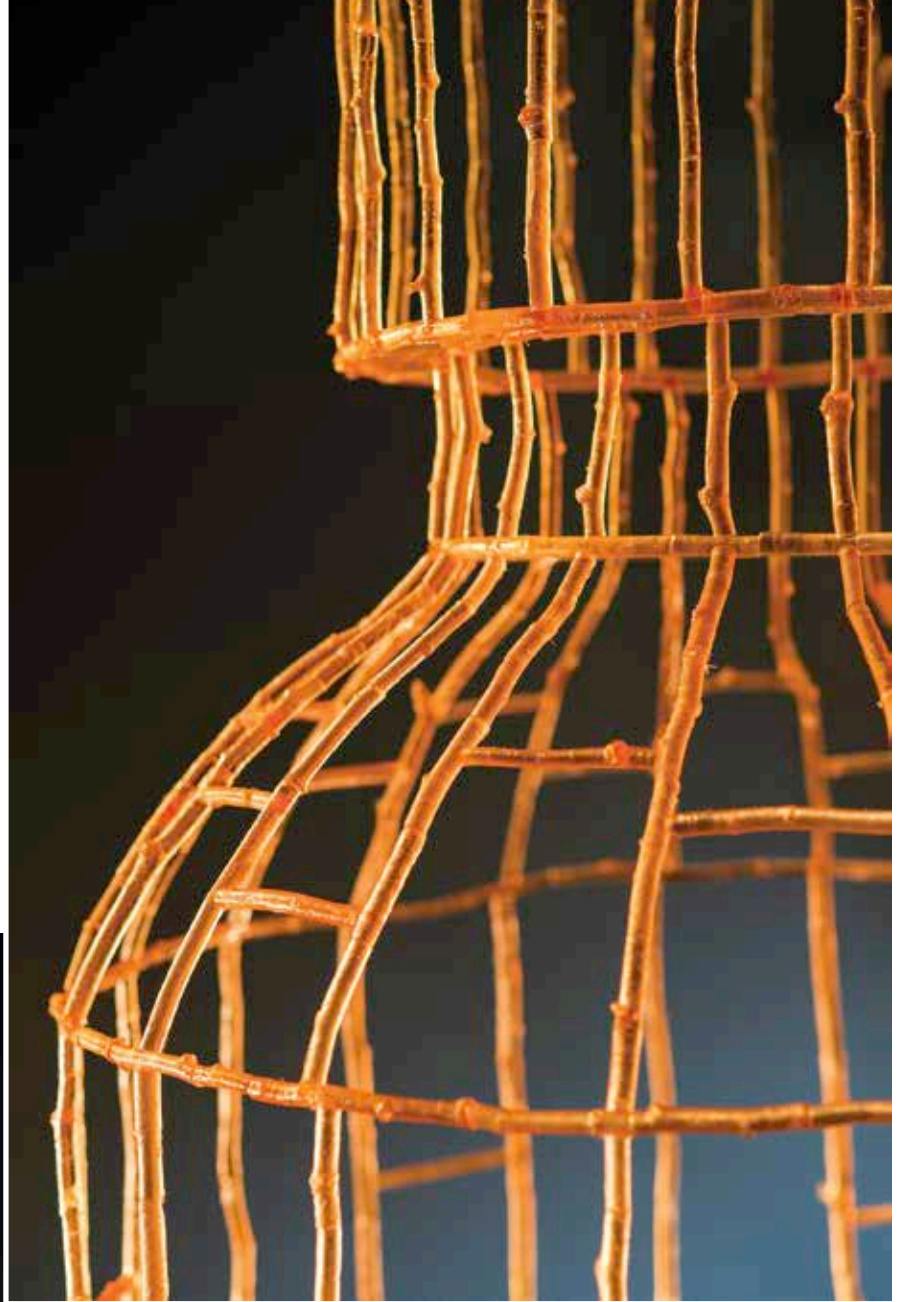
Small moments also animate the work of Shimomoto, though instead of the

science of cells, she finds inspiration in the overlooked beauty of the everyday. Light, airy and nest-like, Shimomoto's glass tapestries appear as free-form gestural drawings suspended in the air. Composed of a thicket of carefully arranged, hand-pulled glass threads fused into panels and hung in layers from nearly invisible wires, her pieces have a palpable depth

3

and an apparent softness that is unusual in this brittle material. Subtle and quiet, but with a persistent power that amplifies with continued observation, Shimomoto cites her inspiration in the color, movement and forms of nature. But, she says, "I don't have to be in spectacular nature. I just look for small things...When you are busy, you don't see things, but if you look...[you will see] something new...and looking closer, it will change your view."

For instance, the motivation for *To Red*, a geometric collection of fence-like grid forms that calls to mind the expressive mark-making of contemporary painting and the inventiveness of 1960s off-loom weaving, came from a fallen autumn leaf. "One day, the leaves were changing, and I like red leaves, so I picked them up," says Shimomoto. "Looking very closely, it's not only red—it has black and yellows and other colors." Shimomoto connects her interest in recording fleeting moments of nature in the fragile material of glass with her Japanese heritage. She says, "My work is not as fragile as it looks, but you can feel the



4

4
Rob Snyder, *Dropper*, lost branch kiln cast glass, assembled, 69 x 24 x 24".
 Photo by Terry Behal.

5
Harue Shimomoto, *Akisora*, glass, 40 x 24 x 7".
 Courtesy the artist.

fragility. Fragility, for me, is momentary or impermanent...Buddhism teaches us that nothing is permanent. Like flowers that don't last a long time, but that makes you appreciate the flower more...[the idea of] fragility adds to my work."

Like Shimomoto, Snyder finds power in unsung nature and transcendent beauty in the everyday. His current work, monumental, three-dimensional line drawings of iconic glass vessels, reasserts the fundamental connection between humans, plants and glass. Each of the forms he's chosen—from the eyedropper bottle used to dispense herbal remedies, to the proudly shouldered maple syrup jug, the sturdy cylinder of a wine bottle or the orb-bottomed drop of an alchemist's flask—were developed to hold specific substances derived from nature. Blown up to larger-



4



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than-human size, and constructed out of golden amber cast glass twigs, Snyder's vessels are alternately massive, fragile and otherworldly.

While they are a significant departure from his past work, which deployed similar cast glass twigs in natural forms from cocoons to nests, the vessels are nonetheless motivated by the same impulses. As Snyder explains, referencing Jungian scholar James Hollis, "My work has always been about expressing the divinity of nature through glass....And glass is something that has historically been used to show, in stained glass windows, the divinity in things, in life. I'm using cast glass twigs that light up...and express that." However, where Snyder's past work had a strongly reverential feeling, the quotidian forms of his new pieces exhibit a novel tongue-in-cheek jocularity that is tempered by their

glowing, basket-like construction. The tension between these two characteristics (what Snyder refers to as "polk art," a combination of pop and folk) gives life to his pieces and seems to suggest an intermediate path where, as in Lee's and Shimomoto's work, the ordinary can become extraordinary.

Quixotic rather than didactic, the work of Lee, Shimomoto, and Snyder encapsulates the beauty of the everyday and the mysteries of both glass and nature. Though their work is based in scientific observation and exploration, theirs is an empirical naturalism, whose aim is to elicit wonder at the surrounding world, rather than illustrate its processes. And that is also how they want their works to be viewed. As Shimomoto says, "The only thing I wish is that [viewers] try to feel the work, not that they think. I want people to see and to feel. Don't think." ●

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