

reviews



Nancy Callan and Katherine Gray, *Squirt*, 2020. Blown and sculpted glass. H 23 ¾, W 16 ½, D 5 in.
COURTESY: THE ARTISTS

Nancy Callan and Katherine Gray

"THE CLOWN IN ME LOVES YOU"
BAINBRIDGE ISLAND MUSEUM OF ART
BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, WASHINGTON
JULY 2–SEPTEMBER 26, 2021

You either love clowns or hate them. Or maybe you love that they've become hateful and creepy in recent popular culture. In any case, clowns typically don't inspire quiet reflection, which is one reason the exhibition "The Clown in Me Loves You"—a collaboration between well-known glass artists Nancy Callan and Katherine Gray—was so surprising. This thoughtful show hid hints of history and emotion beneath shiny colorful surfaces and the playful iconography of clowndom: ball noses, honking horns, and exaggerated smiles.

The very topic of clowns was a surprising choice for a couple of artists at the top of their game. Callan is an expert in Venetian glass cane techniques and a long-standing member of Lino Tagliapietra's team. Widely admired for an approach that fuses concept and technique, Gray has

served as head evaluator for Netflix's *Blown Away* series for two seasons. For a field that prizes technical expertise and heritage—often distancing itself from its kitschier applications—clowns may feel a bit lighthearted or lowbrow.

But the topic personally resonated with the artists and captured the playful experimentation that has been part of their professional lives and friendship. Moreover, for female artists who have been part of a male-dominated field for decades, the choice could be seen as boldly irreverent, a squirt in the eye of high seriousness and exclusion. And, of course, the clown is a time-honored figure rendered in glass by Muranese glassblowers of all levels—from the distorted figures, sold in tourist shops to the one-of-a-kind, life-size clowns expertly hot-sculpted and lampworked by maestro Pino Signoretto (1944–2017).

Spurred by the closure of Ringling Brothers Circus in 2017, Callan and Gray worked together over the next four years to tease out their interest in clowns, creating the vivid glass panels, poignant sculptures, and fascinating mixed-media vignettes that comprised the exhibition. Many of

the works were forged during artist residencies, through collaboration with glassblowing teams at, for example, the Chrysler Museum of Glass (Norfolk, Virginia) and the Museum of Glass (Tacoma, Washington). During the global Covid-19 pandemic, Callan (based in Seattle) and Gray (Los Angeles) would send works back and forth. An atmosphere of conversation, experimentation, and revelation pervaded the exhibition, along with occasional jabs and jokes.

Clowns are both tricksters and mirrors, revealing social behaviors through pantomime and exaggeration, and building their own history and iconography, which parallels different aspects of gender, class, and social roles. The squirting flowers, oversize suits, and whimsical bowler hats are all based on the real attire and accessories worn by conventional men long ago. Female clowns exist, of course, but the symbolism in this show was largely based on male archetypes, particularly the circus clown of Western culture.

Those archetypes were charmingly represented or wittily deconstructed again and again in the exhibition through different forms, techniques, and emotional tones. Several glass panels were based on the classic paint-by-number clown, available in kits that eliminated creative guesswork. In addition to toggling between art and kitsch, these panels play with ideas of nostalgia, incompleteness, and, perhaps, family history, as several have the word "Grumpy" in their titles.

Other references were more pointedly sociopolitical. One of the few jesters in the exhibition appeared in a small repeated motif on a glass panel titled *Tweetstorm*. The tiny figure, wearing a bulbous nose and floppy crown, bears a striking resemblance to a grumpy Donald Trump.

The clown horn was another motif in the exhibition, contributing to the two most theatrical installations. In one centerpiece, a large, metal, drum-like frame became a silent stage for a pile of white blown-glass horns. The life-size instruments—with their delicate, unseizeable bulbs—are clearly mute and nonfunctional. The

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silence of the drum and horns, along with the pile of ghostly forms, adds power to the work's title, *Thoughts and Prayers*, a phrase that has been criticized as an ineffectual response to tragic events like mass shootings.

The other centerpiece was bigger in every way: two beautiful glass horns, each about four feet long, rested on their own pedestals, facing each other. The light gleamed off the shining black and silver. Moving closer, you could hear an audio recording of the artists alternately laughing and crying. As an allusion to the emotional pivoting that clowns represent, the audio was too on the nose (as was some of the other symbolism in the show), but the back-and-forth, multisensory nature of the installation did evoke the spirit of emotional exchange that is clearly shared by the artists.

A row of small cases on pedestals offered a more nuanced range of concept and story. Each vitrine was its own sideshow, a mysterious set of objects that lured you in to figure out its ambiguous story.

One case was full of references to Venice, Italy, the most famous glassmaking center in the world. A beautiful, multi-colored swirling glass base sprouted not one goblet but two, along with a multitude of techniques including some glorious lattice filigree. Nearby was a photograph of two glass figurines: Harlequin characters that refer to Venice's long history of masking and comedic theater (the *commedia dell'arte*). But these Venetian references were tempered with paraphernalia like plastic clownhead cupcake toppers and a hobo patch (the hobo has his own patches, of course). You could imagine the artists delighting in the composition of each box, intermingling artistic, popular, and personal histories in a blend that is just vague enough to be infinitely intriguing.

This, after all, is what clowns may offer us. They are known but unknowable, drawing from centuries of history and more recent childhood memories. Clowns can use their skillful ridiculousness to speak truth to power, reflect the horrors of contemporary life, or conjure up conflicted

personal emotions. Nancy Callan and Katherine Gray prove that a dynamic collaboration between skillful artists can do the same.

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Group Exhibition

"HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT"
PACE GALLERY
NEW YORK CITY
JULY 14–AUGUST 20, 2021

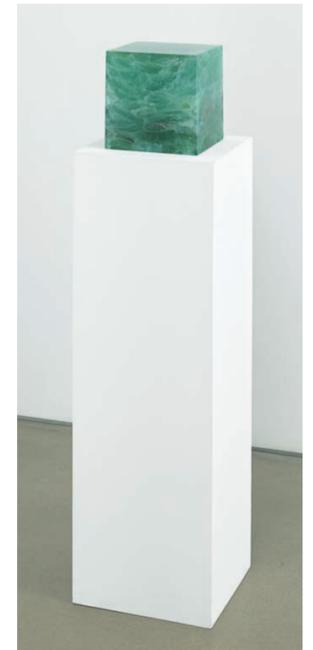
Minimalist art, a reaction to the excesses of Abstract Expressionism, is an example of critique by counterexample, and trades at times austere distillation for the florid gesture of its predecessor. For its midsummer exhibition at its New York flagship, "Hiding in Plain Sight," Pace Gallery mounted a group exhibition of 18 artists allied in their recognition that Minimalism can also be a potent tool to unmask diffuse systems of power and oppression. Publicity online and in print consisted of a singular image of a work in glass: a sharp-edged, pale green cube with a complex interior of gray and black patches caught up in a swirl of white.

The exhibiting artists are all allied, according to the exhibition statement, in how each uses "the language of Minimalism and abstraction to distill complex subjects into forms that reveal new frameworks of meaning, revelation, and resistance for the here and now." Trevor Paglen's *Trinity Cube* (2017) manages to do exactly that and was likely chosen for how it embodies multilayered critique within a potent but minimalist object.

Glass is, by nature, revealing, and the complex interior of Paglen's cube suggests tumultuous movement and change, like a frozen moment inside the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. *Trinity Cube* has as its core a portion of trinitite, a glassy substance that was created during the 1945 atomic bomb test in Alamogordo,

New Mexico (code name Trinity) that would lead directly to the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Paglen underscored this connection when he fused the 20th-century trinitite with irradiated glass found at the contaminated site of the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, connecting two nuclear disasters in Japan separated by 66 years.

Glass-like materials called "atomsites" are created from sand and debris that melts whenever nuclear weapons are detonated at ground level, but trinitite was the only kind of atomsite to be given its own name. When Japan complained of radioactivity caused by the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and



Trevor Paglen, *Trinity Cube*, 2017. Irradiated glass from Fukushima Exclusion Zone, trinitite. H 8, W 7 ¾, D 7 ¾ in.
COURTESY: PACE GALLERY, NEW YORK