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ADRIANO BERENGO

I don't usually stop and think about the future, let alone the past. My daily life doesn't give me time.

But this is a special year: thirty years have passed since I opened the first furnace of Berengo Studio, the glass workshop in Murano, and ten years have passed since the inauguration of the first contemporary art exhibition in glass, under the name of *Glasstress*. There are times when we have to take stock of what we have done.

As many know, my mission was to bring glass—especially Murano glass—into the world of contemporary art so that artists belonging to the sphere defined as “fine art,” and therefore not glass artists, could have a new expressive medium, thus freeing the material from the merely decorative or functional image that limited its use in contemporary art until the 1990s.

When you are extremely involved in a mission, where every moment is precious and crucial to change the course of a journey, sometimes you do not realize what is happening. The only goal is to overcome the challenge you face in that moment. And it doesn't matter how big it is.

I myself am amazed to see more and more sculptures and installations, made at my Studio in Murano, in prestigious exhibitions around the world, signed by artists who have never been associated with glass.

In 2019, a year that is very important to me, a series of exceptional events occurred: the retrospective of Thomas Schütte at the Monnaie de Paris, followed by a wonderful exhibition at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz Institute for Contemporary Art. In both these exhibitions, the curators who were tracing the fundamental points of the German artist's career found it essential to include some sculptures in glass. Schütte created his very first glass works in my furnace and named the pieces *Berengo Head*. It was a great honor for me.

On September 13, the first exhibition of the celebrated artist Wael Shawky opened at the Lisson Gallery in New York; here a complex glass panel wrought like an antique bas-relief signaled a very important step forward for my Studio and for glass in general.

A Wonderful Story

Again this year, if you happened to visit the exhibition *New Glass Now* at the Corning Museum in New York, you could admire the sculptures that the jury of critics and curators selected as the best works among thousands of applications. The exhibition presented works from over twenty-five countries by hundreds of artists, with the most important pieces made in the last three years. The selected works made in Murano for this exhibition were: *Bonded* (2017) by the Italian artist Monica Bonvicini, *Mutter* (2017) by the Austrian Erwin Wurm, and an incredible inlaid giant stamp titled *The Stamp* (2017) by the Saudi artist Abdunasser Gharem; accompanying them was an artist whose work I presented both in *Glasstress 2017* and as a highlight at the 2019 retrospective: the American Dustin Yellin.

Then there was the Venice Biennale, for the 58th edition we created works for three countries and their pavilions: France with the artist Laure Prouvost, Austria with the artist Renate Bertlmann, and Italy with Liliana Moro. It is also a wonderful opportunity to mention all these women, who are some of the greatest representatives and creators of international contemporary art. The year 2019 was certainly one to remember.

Following the intuition of Peggy Guggenheim and Egidio Costantini, I wanted to work to free Murano glass from the repetition and mimicry of its glorious past, reviving the best of its tradition while looking forward into the future. In the early 1990s, I finally felt we were heading in the right direction when the artist Kiki Kogelnik created her first collection in Murano glass, titled *Venetian Head*. As a well-known figure on the international

scene, and an undisputed symbol of Austrian Pop art, her move to work in the medium confirmed change was afoot.

From this moment on, collaborations followed with Arno Arts, Paul Bradley, James Coignard, Robert Zeppel-Sperl, and Michel van Overbeeke. Riccardo Licata used glass to write and narrate his world of symbols; Pino Castagna, an Italian sculptor, never accepted the imposed dimensional limits of manual glass processing and, inspired by the classical Rezzonico chandelier, created a piece that reached previously unimaginable dimensions for the time. Thanks to the overlapping process of single elements, supported from a central metal body, together we succeeded in creating bamboo reeds of glass several meters high. These works have now been displayed in numerous private collections around the world, and exhibited in prestigious locations such as Montecitorio, Palazzo Ducale, and in the form of public art at Castellon de la Plana in Spain.

After this extraordinary feat came the meeting, as magical as it is surreal, with the Spanish artist Juan Ripollés. His ironic, somewhat self-representative sculptures reflected the colors and traditions of Venetian clown sculptures, with an unparalleled lightness and irony, and have now traveled the world.

Albeit niche names, I like to mention these artists since they were the first to really embark on this new interpretation of glass, taking full advantage of the beginning of a revolutionary process. It is also thanks to them that today I can boast about my collaborations with the likes of Jimmie Durham, Sean Scully, Paul McCarthy, and dozens of other very important art-world figures. It was these first collaborations and the resulting works that were the precursors, innovators with great respect for tradition which somehow conveyed to the big names of today that they could dare, and express a vision of the contemporary with an ancient and complex material.

I have also had the pleasure of collaborating with glass masters who have managed to cross over into contemporary art such as Lino Tagliapietra and Richard Jolley with whom an important collaboration has been established over the past ten years.

A special mention goes to my friend, the artist Koen Vanmechelen. A brilliant mind that not only fell in love with glass and made it a constant in his artistic production, but has also become a source of inspiration and support in my own journey over the last thirty years. Vanmechelen has always managed to look deeply at art, making it an interdisciplinary subject and overcoming its limits of scope and time. I knew he would have been the only curator for the retrospective section of *Glasstress 2019*.

The contemporary section of the exhibition was entrusted to the artist and curator Vik Muniz, who invited new artists to reflect on *how glass changes our perception of space*. I, too, stopped to think, not as a connoisseur of glass, but with the eyes and mind of a navigator, entrepreneur, and art lover.

Instinctively, I reflected on how the artistic glass of Murano managed to influence the concept of time. The language of glass is made of a silence that has a lot to tell, where everything

evolves and changes, opening a crack in time that only those who have the humility to wait and listen can understand.

It is no coincidence that for the image of the *Glasstress 2019* exhibition my eye was chosen to look through a broken glass. I do not know whether you are beyond this fragile barrier or whether I have been imprisoned there, but what I have tried to do in these thirty years has been to create a means of communication between two apparently incompatible and distant worlds. I fought hard to create that breach which allowed contemporary art to take advantage of a very important medium of expression. I fought for glass to emerge from the decades in which its image had been caught between clichés and stereotypes.

Visiting *Glasstress*, and Berengo Studio where so many of the artworks were made, the invitation is to listen to what the work has to say: behind every sculpture there is a story. A story of an encounter, between the artist and the glass, a hard-won challenge, the creative process. We have tried to give back part of this experience through video interviews and backstage documentation because the production process in this case is itself a work of art.

Something great has happened and is still happening in the world of art and glass. I reflect on what has been done and the answer given to me by the artists themselves, those who first encountered glass at Berengo Studio and have never left it: the giants of our time such as Ai Weiwei, Tony Cragg, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Jan Fabre, Shirazeh Houshiary, Vik Muniz, Jaume Plensa, only to name a few who have worked with Berengo Studio for years.

But also the casting school, which was started just three years ago and which I plan to grow with the aim of creating a true center of excellence. The combination of innovation and tradition has proved to be an extremely important key to reading and inspiration.

I put all this at your disposal, with all my energy and passion. Artists, critics, curators, collaborators, enthusiasts, and you—the public—have made this great step towards the future of contemporary glass possible.

This project would not exist without the all-encompassing dedication and madness that led me to look beyond today by inviting, and sometimes chasing, great artists to tell them a wonderful story. Seneca said that luck does not exist, but there is a time when talent and opportunity meet. I like to think that my Studio is that place.

Future projects are already in the works. The Fondazione Berengo received a most welcome invitation to present a grand edition of *Glasstress* at The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, followed by stops in India, Mexico, Brazil, and China.

The year 2019 is a milestone not only for the celebration of a decade of contemporary art in glass, and the thirty-year production of Berengo Studio, but also because it delicately restores a part of art history, a chapter of which you can admire now in fresh ink as it is written. This story is only at its beginning—you are all writing part of it now.