Practices | Jan 2018

Dialogues Interviews Cybele Maylone Executive Director at Urban Glass

Image courtesy of Urban Glass

Overview

Dialogues interviews **Cybele Maylone**, Executive Director at **Urban Glass**. In this interview we discuss the material of glass itself and the structure and function of Urban Glass' residency programs in relation to the material. Subjects that emerged from our conversation include, time, failure, community and cross-cultural histories through the lens of the material of glass itself.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to lalita@residencyunlimited.org

Recently, I was lucky enough to have a tour of UrbanGlass' studio with Residency Unlimited's summer cohort. Since then I've been completely mesmerized and a little obsessed with glass, and its history. Firstly there is obsidian formed at the mouth of a volcano as a result of the intense heat of an eruption melting sand. When I saw the glass melting in person it looked so much like lava flowing down a hill but this force of nature was being delicately manipulated before my eyes, I felt as if I was in a vortex -- time traveling between NYC 2017 and 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia when the craft itself of glassmaking is said to have been discovered. Do you have a personal experience with glass that stands out in your mind that you would like to share?

Well, I was talking about this yesterday with a colleague. We have staff days in our studio about every other month which is a great way for everyone on our staff to be able to enjoy and utilize the studio. On this past staff day, I was blowing glass, and I'm terrible at it. I was telling the person that I was working with that I took my first glassblowing class here when I worked at Urban Glass for about a year. And so by that time, I had already spent a fair amount of time in our studio watching artists making work. As is often the case when you're watching people, particularly people that are incredibly good at doing something, it looks easy.

I took the first class, and I came home and said to my husband, "Well, that is awful. And I hate it." It was a jarring experience because it was so dramatic. I think one of the things that is compelling and addictive for a lot of people about glass blowing is the drama of it all. It is sweltering, and it is physical, challenging, and incredibly hard. It was the first time that as an adult, I'm embarrassed to say, that I had tried to do something tough and been bad at it. But I have kept it up, and I have continued learning, it has been an incredibly satisfying experience. It uses all of these parts of my brain and my body that I previously had not been accessing. It's humbling that my first experience was, "Well, that's terrible." It was an experience that I was glad to have because I think it revealed to me how a lot of people feel in that kind of first experience, which is challenged.

Also, there are a lot of things about glassblowing that I think people enjoy who are not interested in making any physical object. The same way that some people play instruments, just love to play even if it is not necessarily a performance.

In regard to the history of the craft, ritual instructions for glassmaking in Mesopotamia were written on clay tablets in cuneiform from as early as 3,300 years ago. These instructions were copied and recopied over the centuries. Here is an excerpt:

"When you set up the foundation of kiln to make glass, you first search in a favorable month for a propitious day, and only then you set up the foundation of the kiln. As soon as you have completely finished in the building of the kiln, and you go and place Kubu-images there, no outsider

or stranger should enter the building thereafter; an unclean person must not even pass in front of the images. You regularly perform libation offerings before the Kubu-images. On the day when when you plan to place the glass in the kiln, you make a sheep sacrifice before the Kubu-images, you place juniper incense on the censer, you pour out a libation of honey and liquid butter, and then only, you make a fire in the hearth of the kiln and place the glass in the kiln…"

I bring this up to discuss the mystical qualities inherent within the material itself and the idea that when crafting glass the artist is interacting with a powerful and natural element. It also points to the idea of fragility and chance that artists are dealing with when confronting the medium. Can you discuss how the medium itself informs the structure of UrbanGlass' artist-in-residence program?

Glass is a material that is magical, and it is also one that has complicated physical properties that are understood and continuously explored by scientists. So it appeals to artists, on either side of the spectrum. Some are interested in the physical properties of it that explore and experiment with the materials similar to scientific inquiry. And others just want to explore and magnify the magical properties of glass. I think both of those ends of the spectrum are based in this sense that there is still a lot we don't know about glass, and that there are still things that it does that cause people to scratch their heads. And with that is a desire for our residency program to support experimentation, to support artists pushing those boundaries, pushing the boundaries of their work, and then also pushing the boundaries of the material. Furthermore, doing that in a space that understands that failure is going to happen. That failure is inherent in the material, that, of course, glass breaks, and also glass does a lot of things that sometimes surprise artists that have been making work in the material for decades. Sometimes artists might think, "We are going to execute this series, and we are going to end up with this." That is not always the case. I think that is what spurs this scientific investigation that spurs people's mystical and magical interest in the material.

It is often only in failure that new things are revealed, and I think all of that is informed by glass itself. Furthermore, the structure of the residency program is informed by what artists encounter when they are making working glass.

I think the idea of failure is so interesting in the context of how we live today because everything tends to be about production and perfection. In schools for children, it is about passing tests. I heard a lecture at The Bank Street College of Education some years ago about how elementary schools that teach failure to children actually enhances the quality of their learning. Failure is such an important thing to incorporate. Do your resident artists speak about failure in the beginning when they encounter it?

It depends, they're stepping outside of their comfort zone, and often that means a willingness to surrender. But before they get in the studio, the first time my colleague and I sit down with them we talk about failure. The artists come in really excited about their ideas, and we remind them that those

failures are really about the material. It is not us as an organization saying, "We're not gonna let you do this." Rather, "We are going to try, with you, we will help you try this, but it may explode, break apart, or never solidify." When you're trying to make work for the first time in another material, you as the artist might not like how it's resolved the first six times you try it.

I think when artists go in with that expectation and the understanding that the organization that's hosting them is ready for that, is pushing them towards things that might not be successful, I think they may be a little bit more comfortable with that inevitable failure.

What reports have you heard from artists after about the legacy of that experience and the impact on their practice?

I've heard from artists that being here has changed the way that they work. Although I'm curious, I've never talked to anyone about failure, per se. I wonder if some of them just leave and are so relieved to go back to a material or to go back to other materials that they have more control over. But definitely, artists often leave, saying, "The thing that I thought that was going to be the most impactful about this experience was going to be the work that I made. But in addition to the work that I made, what was impactful was being in a different type of a studio." And that often has just as much, if not more of a bearing on them when they leave as perhaps the work that they've made.

Can you please speak about failure vis a vis time? Are they two parts of whole, when it comes to the material of glass?

Our residencies are close to a year in length and organized around a budget that we give artists to work with. We encourage artists to use that, budget with us over a longer period of time because failure and time go hand in hand. We know an artist will come, and the first thing that they will do here will probably not be successful, either because of technical problems or because they're creating work in the new material for the first time, or for a variety of reasons.

We have found the important way for them to use that failure productively is to have some time to reflect on it, to kind of sit and think about it, building some failure into their time in our studio gives them more chances to adjust and reflect as those failures are happening especially because glass is a material that has some inherent time built into it. You could put something in a kiln here for three days, and you might open it at the end of three days and find that it's all broken. That happens to people all the time for a wide variety of reasons. It's really easy to have that time chip away because of the glass itself.

That means that we want to give people time between that initial failure to step back, think, and reassess and not feel the immediate pressure to show off the next day, to think of a new idea. Because, that idea might not work, and we don't want artists to be making work under pressure. They need time to think about that project, and why it didn't work, and how it turns into something else. Giving them time is a really important way to use those failures successfully.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to lalita@residencyunlimited.org

making work under pressure. They need time to think about that project, and why it didn't work, and how it turns into something else. Giving them time is a really important way to use those failures successfully.

To that end, is there an output requirement for the participating artists in residence?

We have exhibited the work that our artists and residents have made, and that is always a wonderful exercise for us. Also, residents have exhibited the work they have made here elsewhere, which is also exciting. But we do not put pressure on them by saying, "At the end of your time with us, you need to have built a show." Because we know in that we are saying to them, "Produce, produce, produce." And instead, what we want them to be doing is taking risks, That's both for them and for the larger studio and the material itself. I think taking that expectation off the plate is important to free them up.

Now, we do have our artists and residents give a public talk or performance. Sometimes that consists of artists standing up at the end of that term and saying, "I still don't know what this is." Or, "I'm still thinking about that." I think it's important to have an opportunity for our audience and our artists' community to participate in an exchange about the work, but not put the pressure on them to have it be resolved.

UrbanGlass was founded in 1977 as an artist-run Experimental Glass Workshop, its original name. Is there a relationship between UrbanGlass' foundation as artist co-op and the development of the artist residency program as it exists today?

When our founders started the organization, they named it, the New York Experimental Glass Workshop. We changed our name to UrbanGlass because there are fewer words in it. From our very earliest days, there was an idea that we were an organization that was interested in supporting experimental work. We are always looking to draw our through lines between those early days and what we do now. I think the artist-in-residence program is a place where we support experimentation. I love that Experimental Glass Workshop was our original name because it speaks to so much of what we want to do as an organization in general. The residency program has this focus on supporting artists and making experimental work. We think of experimental, as trying new things and maybe having failures. So, while that name is no longer with us, I think the spirit of it is still very much at heart of what we try to do programmatically.

Can you elaborate on the structure of the residency opportunities you offer?

We have two distinct residencies. The first is our Visiting Artist Fellowship, and that is an opportunity that comes with extensive technical support and is geared towards supporting artists who are not able to work independently in our studio. That means artists, often, that have little to no experience with glass. Those artists are here for a period, between 9 and 12 months. They get a budget to use in our studio that covers essentially half people and half materials in the studio. This means there is a technician that is with the resident artist at every point along the way. And those experts may change

because an artist may come in initially be interest in glassblowing but the move on to casting which requires a different set of technical skills.

The Visiting Artist Fellowship is application-based. Artists apply with a project. That project with which they apply has less to do with what we are going to force them to make while they're here and is requested as an opportunity for our outside jury, to get a sense of how the artist might be thinking about using our studio. Our juries are always composed of an artist, a curator, and another artist from our studio community. It's really important that there is always someone that is making work here day in and day out that participates in those conversations.

The other residency, we have, is called our Studio Residency, which is for artists that can make work independently in the studio. The Studio Residency is designed to support new experimental work from artists that already are making work in glass, and give them time, space, and encouragement, to try new things that they might not have done under the normal constraints of our studio. This year we have four artists that are participating in that program. They are here for roughly 9 to 12 months. It is based on a budget that does not cover technical support which is the main difference between the two residency programs because we understand that the Studio residents can utilize the studio on their own. Although, for both visiting artists and studio residents, they can use their budget to enroll in classes. So it is entirely possible that an artist may come in and be an extraordinary glassblower, but they want to make work in neon. Therefore they can use some of their budgets to take classes in our neon studio and learn how to use that studio.

The residency is a great opportunity as an organization to support the artists that are here often day in and day out, and support them in experimental projects and pushing their work forward. I think what's so often important about residencies of any kind is that they are opportunities for artists to step back or step to the side; approach their work differently. We hope that the Studio Residency is a time for people that even, though they are here already, are using that time and space to do something new, do something experimental, do something that they might not have the bandwidth to pursue on their own.

What year exactly did the residency program start?

That is an excellent question. And I wish that I had an answer for you. The Studio Residency began two years ago. We started that out of a response to the Visiting Artists Fellowship being so in demand. Artists at a certain phase of their career were applying, which was wonderful, but we wanted to make sure we were still supporting and providing opportunities for emerging artists that are making work in glass. The Visiting Artists Fellowship though, maybe not as formalized as it is now, I have a feeling was going from the beginning. I think it was the spirit of the place; I wish I had more details about a starting date and a super comprehensive list. All sorts of artists from all sorts of, kind of backgrounds have been artists-in-residence here.

sorts of, kind of backgrounds have been artists-in-residence here.

I think that speaks to two things. One, the idea of how an artist-run workshop functions, and secondly the development of the field of residency itself, which was more undefined and not-recorded in say the 80s as per the lack of records to the documented cycles of artists coming through today in your Visiting Artist Fellowship and Studio Artist programs.

I wanted to discuss the facilities for a moment and the residents' interaction with and access to these facilities. From UrbanGlass' website I learned there is:

17,000 square foot state-of-the-art studios... including a hot shop, cold shop, kiln room, flameworking shop, mold room, and flat working area. The hot shop has six glory holes ranging in size from nine to 36 inches, two 1,000 pound furnaces, and a wide range of annealers. The cold shop features heavy equipment such as belt sanders and can be easily cleaned by hosing down the equipment into large grated floor sinks. The studios also feature a dedicated kiln room with 14 kilns and a mold shop. The lampworking studio houses workstations for 15 artists and a variety of torches at each station." Within this studio, the needs of the 300 artists and 600 students that annually utilize the organization's facility, are comprised of a mixture of established artists, designers, students and more; how does the residency program fit into this equation; in other words how does the residency contribute to the dialogue of the community and how does the community inform the artist-in-residence?

One of the other important things that we take into consideration when any of the residents are being selected, and one of the things that we are clear with the selected participants about is that we want them to be here. I know that might sound obvious, but there is a tradition of fabrication in glass. That artists, send things into factories to be made, and the work is fabricated, and then exhibited. An important part of our artist-in-residence program as it relates to our core community is that the residents are here because that is where there is an exchange, and that is where there is cross-pollination. Everything from friendships, and relationships, to inspiration.

I always say to residents, "We want you to roll around on the floor of our studio." We want them to get dirty. That is because we want them to develop material knowledge while they are here so that they can take that knowledge out into the world and into their work in the future. We want to be providing them with support for the work that they are making here. But hopefully, what they learn will inform them in something that they are making ten years from now.

In a studio community like this, and in the glass community in general, there are technical hurdles all the time. People are always talking to each other. "Hey, what are you doing? Why isn't that working? Here's my idea. Here's what I think you should do." And so, there is this an open exchange of ideas. One resident artist noted that the material was one thing, but the openness of the community itself was far more inspiring and exciting to her in a way that she didn't even realize. And I think that is true. It's almost like a social experiment. Often, artists and residents have never been in a situation like this because situations like this frankly don't exist in most any other types of places or studios. Often, you get your little room, and you've got peace. That is wonderful, but that is not what you get here. I think that the kind of exchange that happens between the artists and residents and the artists in our community here is vibrant, and it's exhilarating to both parties. The residency fuels, a lot of what happens in the community. And the community fuels a lot of what happens for the residents.

I don't mean that the artists in residents clock in and out, but just that we want to see them. We don't want residents giving their teaching artists a drawing and saying, "I'll be back in six months." Indeed, that is a way that artists work, and that is certainly a way we support artists in other ways that work in this manner.

Indeed, the idea of community is at the core of what the best of artist-in-residence programs can offer, and the setting at Urban is unique in this landscape. I'd like to keep that in mind for the *second-to-last* question. Because of the large-scale and specialized equipment that makes up glassworking facilities they are often located outside of urban environments. What is the significance of providing a glass artist or an artist from another medium the ability to explore glass in the context of the urban environment and furthermore how does the residency address this? You addressed this with the idea of community and isolation, but is there anything more about being in an urban environment that is interesting to the functioning of the residency?

By virtue of us being in New York, we are in a place where there is a massive community of people that are here in our studio all the time, and then there is a huge community of artists and designers and makers in general. Glass artists are really challenged by space and equipment in New York City, but at the same time, they live in a place where UrbanGlass exists. And so there is this endless flow of new people through our studio and new people that are curious about our studio or curious about what they can do in glass. I think UrbanGlass, and this is of course in our name now, would not exist in, a rural setting. It's a gigantic studio, which still at sometimes feels like it's not big enough. But it is big and vibrant because we are in a city like New York where there are artists that come here from all over the world. We are deeply enmeshed with New York City as a place where artists come to create, and people come to see art and participate in culture. I think the location is critical to kind of who we are as an organization.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to lalita@residencyunlimited.org

Lastly, back to the history of the craft and Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia was an ancient region in the eastern Mediterranean bounded in the Northeast by the Zagros Mountains and in the Southeast by the Arabian Plateau, corresponding to today's Iraq, and parts of modern-day Iran, Syria, and Turkey. In today's climate where the West is often positioned against the East and the Global south by politicians and xenophobic policy makers; understanding the routes of something so ubiquitous as glass and the origins of its artistic production are significant. On a daily basis with the artists, students, and residents who pass through UrbanGlass how do you see this playing out in real time and from a local perspective?

With roots in the middle east, glass is a material that is an essential part of our archeological record and tells us much about past lives from all over the world. Today glass is seen and used by everyone, no matter their nationality or position in life, and there are distinct glass making traditions in many different parts of the world. Being in New York, I feel that UrbanGlass plays a unique role in bringing people from a variety of backgrounds together through glassmaking. In our studio you find artists from a wide variety of backgrounds and from around the world working with one and other, in the collaborative process that is so unique to glass. These efforts to bring people together are subtle, but I think are part of a daily resistance to isolation and fear.

Cybele Maylone has a BA in Art History from Earlham College and a MA in Arts Administration from Columbia University. She has worked at several important museums and arts organizations, including the Museum of Natural History, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, ArtTable and, most recently, Apexart, where she oversaw the staging of several exhibitions of contemporary art every year, exercised financial management and was responsible for marketing and communications.

www.urbanglass.org

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to lalita@residencyunlimited.org