

NY ARTS

Feature
Created Light - Kim Carpenter



Helen Brough, Emulated Flora. Plexiglas and mirrored stainless steel, 30 feet x 40 feet. Sculpture commissioned by Jane and David Walentas, special thanks to Triangle Arts Association. Photo credit: Etienne Frossard (c) 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

Helen Brough is a British painter, drawer, sculptor and installation artist whose work transforms light and its transparencies into ebullient abstractions, as well as sharp social commentaries. In May 2006, she installed Emulated Flora at 70 Washington Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn. Jane and David Walentas commissioned the work through the Triangle Arts Association, an organization that provides free studio space to artists from all over the world. Originally housing only artist studios, the warehouse was converted in 2005 to include high-end condominiums. For this installation, Brough suspended 70 vibrantly colored laser-cut Plexiglas forms from a stainless steel mirrored ceiling, an installation that dramatically showcases her ability to meld color, depth and form to dazzling effect. During this recent interview, the artist reflects on light and its evolution in her work, along with her innovative combinations of media and techniques.

Kim Carpenter: In your work, you experiment with light in very original and provocative ways, and in many ways, light emerges as the subject in and of itself. What attracts you to explore light and its ephemeral qualities?

Helen Brough: Light and chiaroscuro have always fascinated artists. One thing about [neoclassicist artist Giovanni Battista] Piranesi is that his drawings are in black and white, but they are suffused with light. It is not only about light, as it's equally about reflection and refraction, intertwined with subtle tonal changes, which conveys a sense of mood.

KC: Piranesi has also influenced your work in terms of content. For your recent solo show at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts (in Omaha, NE), you focused on climate change and cataclysmic moments. What drove you to render imagined, wide-scale natural destruction brought on by the human element?

HB: When I received the Rome Prize, I spent a lot of time in the library of the British School, where I found it interesting to look at illustrations and drawings of ruins—particularly those by Piranesi. The Rome of today still resembles these images from the 19th century. Since I've been in New York—five years now—I've once again become increasingly interested in architecture, especially some of the avant-garde structures that are being built across the globe. Currently, I am fascinated with the unconventional architectural projects of O.M.A./Rem Koolhaas, especially projects such as the Seattle Public Library or the CCTV Tower in Beijing, which is still under construction. These structures represent contemporary culture and serve as our period's iconography. Last year, these buildings actually appeared in my dreams; however, the buildings were being engulfed by nature. I began to explore these thoughts and asked myself that if all great empires eventually fall, then what would the modern world look like in that moment? This led me to create the series "Cataclysmic Hypotheses," which is still evolving.

KC: Interestingly, your work at times looks more Asian than Italian. Would you say this is accurate?

HB: The influences of Japanese and Chinese painting have had a dramatic impact on my work. Certain periods, such as the Southern Sung Dynasty (960 -1279), are particularly influential, because during this time, landscapes served as metaphors for the painter's feelings, which became increasingly significant. The patterns and forms of rocks mixed with trees became concentrated areas of poetic expression, while painting and poetry were fused together as symbiotic expressions. My formula substitutes rocks with extremely modern, man-made structures that convey chaotic senses and emotions. Perhaps this sounds romantic, but I was drawn to this period for that reason.

KC: You've been called a painter and sculptor. Are you one more than the other, or are you both simultaneously?

HB: I combine both. It's somewhat of a cross-hybrid process for me, and I view my work as mediations. It was unsettling to teachers in college, but critics have been very embracing. Ultimately, though, the medium is not so vital. As an artist, you definitely can make paintings and sculpture and vice versa. Da Vinci, in his "Treatise on Painting," claimed that a sculpture can never have the depth and transparency of a painting. But I realized that utilizing contemporary technologies, materials, techniques and approaches makes this treatise outdated. Sculpture can indeed have a sense of light that has traditionally been difficult to achieve. It's about how you resourcefully construct a sculpture from the various materials that are available to you as an artist.

KC: And just how do you capture light inside of a solid, dense form?

HB: Many artists are using different forms of light. Art News just had an outstanding article on this subject and describes how James Turrell has accomplished amazing pieces that actually make volumetric areas with light. I am experimenting with subtle LED and Electroluminescent lighting so that the work can have a placid glow. Glass relies on light to be effective, and when I am incorporating this aspect into these pieces as part of the

sculpture, the depth is altered, which generates dynamic illusions. I also layer the glass in multiple panes with the images of themes arranged to form acute perspectives. Originally, my fascination with American Abstractionism led me to focus on color combinations and ribbons of light. When I first came to New York, I started a series titled "Urban Movements," based on the luminosity set off by the city and mirrored reflections projected onto glass and water. Some of these pieces were constructed out of cast resin. And, although I enjoy its properties of translucency and transparency, resin is a highly toxic medium, so I decided to try alternatives and switched back to using glass. My history as a sculptor initially started with glass back in the 90s when I produced a series of pieces titled "Seas," which was based on the strength and unpredictability of the North Sea. Later, this was followed by the next series, titled "Storms," which was created for the Salina Art Center, Salina, Kansas. This sculpture was based on the dramatic thunderstorms that were happening in the Midwest, or as the Native Americans referred to them, the "Thunder Gods." These large pieces required a multitude of firings and nearly one ton of glass. The entire sculpture was illuminated with stage lighting, but with the projection lenses covered with varying shades of green gels. This allowed the center to have a supernatural green radiance, which could be seen from far away. Some of the local residents thought it looked like a space ship hovering over the landscape or like something extraterrestrial.

KC: How did you make the switch from using more "painterly materials" to working with glass, which can be technically rather complex?

HB: The enamels used in the stained glass process are similar to oil paints in many ways. The pigment is combined with clove oil, which has a particular smell. It just requires more time than painting on canvas and it also requires a lot of patience. I use electric kilns to fire the glass, and although I have some control over how the paint behaves, the glass stains behave erratically, making the process very interesting and challenging. In 2004, the Triangle Arts Association selected me to be part of a six-month studio residency at 70 Washington Street, which was a great opportunity for me to experiment with different materials. I began doing transparent drawings on acetate. I was eventually introduced to a glass artist named David Fraser who runs the Brooklyn Stained Glass Conservation Studio. David has completed some amazingly intricate restorations of Tiffany windows, such as the windows of St. Anne's Church in Brooklyn. The Brooklyn Stained Glass Studio at the time was directly downstairs from my studio, and I discovered that David had a kiln. Afterwards, I showed him some of my acetate drawings, and he suggested that I try doing them in stained glass. Since then, David has taught me an enormous amount, and it is still an ongoing informal apprenticeship.

KC: From acetate to glass and back again: what does this mean for the direction your work is currently taking?

HB: For the time being, I am in a narrative phase, but the objective is still abstraction. As a contemporary artist, I aspire to integrate aberrant materials with innovative techniques, so that, as an artist, the poetry is unique.