

*Review of “Zurcidos Invisibles:
Alan Glass Construcciones y Pinturas 1950-2008”
Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, November 27-December 12, 2008*

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Sumptuously installed in Mexico City’s Museo de Arte Moderno, “Zurcidos Invisibles: Alan Glass, Construcciones y Pinturas 1950-2008” was the long-awaited retrospective of an artist who has called this country home since 1970. Long aligned with the surrealist movement through artistic temperament and close personal friendships in both France and Mexico, Glass’ drawings and sculptural constructions nonetheless appear strikingly contemporary. His arresting juxtapositions of words, objects and images, although deeply indebted to Surrealism, are also reminiscent of Pop and postmodern appropriations. This perhaps explains why his galleries were full of intrigued and delighted youth. A staggering amount of work was on view, often delicate and fragile arrangements of ephemera. It is to the museum’s great credit that they spared no expense and effort to create an environment where every piece had enough space and light to be shown to its best advantage. The walls were painted exquisite shades of blue, evocative of a fading twilight and perfect for an artist whose work and ideas are inspired by dream and a poetic elusiveness. The exhibition also benefited from the careful selection of the Japanese guest curator Masayo Nonaka, an art historian with an impressive record of shows dedicated to Surrealists.

Born in Montreal, Canada in 1932, Glass’ father was a golf-pro who, for inexplicable reasons, invented a square golf ball, a fact that amuses the artist to this day. Interested in pursuing art he moved to Paris in 1953 to attend the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He soon embarked upon a more bohemian life and, after meeting André Breton, regularly participated in surrealist activities. The friendships he formed with the Surrealists at that time had a profound effect on his life and work,

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and he still spends several months a year in Paris. He became particularly close with Breton's daughter, Aube Elléouët; her collage and assemblage works, in addition to those by Mimi Parent, inspired new directions in his own. During the decade he spent in France, in spite of great poverty, he traveled widely in Europe and the Middle East. A gift of a fantastically decorated sugar skull, made for the Day of the Dead celebrations, inspired in him a great desire to visit Mexico, which he did in 1962. He became so enamored of Mexico that he returned the following year, and in 1970 made it his permanent home.

Another of Glass' close friends was the playwright and filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, who in the 1960s and '70s was working in Mexico. Jodorowsky was involved in the occult—he played an alchemist in his 1973 film *The Holy Mountain*—and while in Mexico began working with the British Surrealist Leonora Carrington, who had been living there since 1943. Through Jodorowsky Glass met Carrington and the two have been inseparable ever since; they still live a few blocks from each other in Colonia Roma. United by mutual interests and a shared sensibility, this friendship nurtured and inspired his work and over the years Carrington has written for his exhibition catalogues in her wickedly comic and impenetrable style. A line from a 1971 text dedicated to Glass reveals much of their artistic alliance: “Hunt the silence for the scream, know that the weight of lead is a hole in time, a thought is seven winds that meet from the seven sides of the whirling weather Rose.” Her play with language is related to his play with found images and objects. Both revel in secret meanings, complex puns, and arcane allusions, spiced with a dash of both seriousness and irreverence.

In many respects, “Zurcidos Invisibles” was a revelation, highlighting the artist's wide knowledge of literature and art history, his exquisite sense of detail and nuance, and most of all, his consummate craftsmanship. Although Glass' overriding aesthetic is that of assemblage, a remarkable body of drawings from the 1950s, rarely seen and brought together here for the first time, was a compelling surprise. Executed on large and small sheets of paper—and even on an animal skin—these drawings teem with minute heads, personages, and architectures done in pencil and covered in pastel-hued watercolor washes. They are so crowded with endless detail that it is hard to do fathom how the artist even did them, and indeed, Glass has said that he did them in a trance state, sometimes losing track of time for up to 16 hours. They possess the horror vacui and obsessiveness of drawings by outsider artists such as Adolf Wölffi or Madge Gill, as well as the otherworldly fantasy of Victorian fairy paintings. Although at a certain point he stopped producing them entirely, he clearly transferred their compulsive, manic energy to his new working mode, boxed assemblages made of found objects.

For decades the artist has scoured flea markets and curio shops, collecting objects that bespeak of the “marvelous” as articulated in Breton’s first *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924. In Paris, Mexico City and other locales Glass has sifted through the material detritus of culture with the dedication of an antiquarian and the eye of a poet, carrying home treasures both mysterious and ordinary. In his studio he combines these items with the precision of a clockmaker so that it is sometimes impossible to tell where the found object ends and his “assistance” begins. Extremely labor intensive, these works nevertheless possess the artful haphazard nature of a carefully constructed poem. Placed under bell jars or in glass-fronted boxes, they combine the theatrical air of carnival attractions with the melancholy of old and moldering natural history displays. The installation artfully worked with this aesthetic by placing the smaller sculptures in large antique vitrines—many lent by the artist—and by keeping the overhead lights low with spotlights on the works. The walls, both flat and curved in places, held quotes from such authors as Victor Hugo, Wols, Arthur Rimbaud, and Saint-Pol-Roux, which echoed the words, phrases, and textual fragments found in the boxes themselves. Going through the galleries of this exhibition one got the occasional feeling of being trapped in a fun house or, more to the point, in one of Glass’ boxes.

Comparisons to the work of Joseph Cornell immediately come to mind, an artist Glass admires but claims not to emulate. Both men, whose arrangements at times take on the air of nostalgic mementos from bygone romantic engagements, share a fussy, feminine aesthetic. What differentiates Glass from the American artist are his more occult symbolic leanings, overt sexual innuendos, sophisticated European references, and the large scale of his more ambitious works. Such disparate items as Tarot cards, toys, shells, firecrackers, palmistry charts, doll parts, nineteenth-century advertisements, and even entire honey combs, fill these boxes; their mysterious proximity to each other prompts the mind to make strange and alien connections. Breton would approve. In *Ziggurat polar* (1980-91) Glass also displays a transnational flair with a print of an archaic temple structure sporting American and British flags and a lintel that reads “Cirque d’Hiver,” while the label below, mounted on red and green paper, proclaims “Viva México.”

A running theme throughout many of his works is sewing, as the inclusion of needles, embroidery hoops, scraps of lace, ribbons, and thimbles, attests. The title of the show, “Zurcidos Invisibles” (Invisible Interweaving), was taken from a tailor’s shop and is writ in neon light, like a real shop sign, at the entry to the exhibition. This hints at Glass’ wider conceptual project of uniting disparate states of consciousness and also to his alignment with feminism. By using traditional women’s craft techniques and materials Glass upends certain hierarchies of art production,

well aware of what such gender reversals might say about his own masculinity. In this he is clearly an unsung pioneer of certain contemporary male artists, both queer and straight, who have appropriated previously demoted means of production as a political statement. A magnificent example of this is his *La perla fina* (2002), a large red felt banner sewn with mother of pearl buttons of various sizes. In the center is a large female form who is posed with her legs spayed wide like the apotropaic Sheelana-Gigs figures found on medieval Irish and British churches and castles. Her hands are held up in an orant position, her sex and breasts carefully delineated, while a crescent moon floats above her head. This syncretic object, a cross between a Native American potlatch blanket and a flag for the revival of a mother goddess cult made by fussy Victorian ladies, is simultaneously solemn and hilarious.

In spite of the fact that “Zurcidos Invisibles” could have benefited from some minor editing of repetitive and less strong work, overall it served as a much-needed showcase for the work of an artist who has remained obscure for too long. Unfortunately an exhibition catalogue was not produced, although a major book on the artist, published as a private enterprise, will shortly become available. The rich imaginary world of Alan Glass has only begun to be explored and will undoubtedly provide rich fodder for future scholars of Surrealism and gender studies.