



MARY SHAFFER



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 HABATAT GALLERIES

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MARY SHAFFER started out as a painter; her subject was light, specifically light framed by windows. When she became a sculptor in the early seventies, she literally took sheets of glass as her material. Subject became object. The feeling windows aroused in Shaffer because they exist as walls you can pass through, at least with your eyes—barriers that keep you physically separate but mentally connected—this fascination was transferred to the sculptures. She “developed a desire to paint about window on an undulating surface like a curtain,”<sup>1</sup> and discovered that slumping, or melting glass in a kiln gave her that surface. But there is a psychological component that goes along with the physical here, a somewhat magical side that is like Alice’s looking glass. Fusing glass, light, and curtain, what is seen with what it is seen through, the over there with the right here, one passes through to another reality. “My art involves a strong element of play,” the artist says, “of losing oneself in another world not unlike the one we knew as children.”<sup>2</sup>

Glass is a surprisingly passive material which melts in fire and fractures when frozen in ice. It comes from the earth but only molten lava is natural glass, the rest is fused by artificially applied heat. And it is permeable to everything about air except air itself. Glass shares with metal its birth in fire, but metal is pervious to atmosphere. Both are used in construction, but glass tends to be used passively to fill in or to decorate, while metal is used structurally. Both have their vulnerabilities and their dangers. Mary Shaffer explores the potentials and the perils of each in work which reveals a love/fear relationship to her materials.

Certain contradictory inclinations have been present in Shaffer’s working process since she first began making sculptures of glass and metal in the early 1970s: an element of risk which is tied to an intense curiosity about what will happen when she tries to push the material beyond its limits, and conversely, a quality of will-lessness which takes pleasure in letting the material do what comes naturally to it. Not a glassblower like the Pilchuck people, Shaffer fires it in a kiln, and once she has set the temperatures and structured the situation, the forming process proceeds without her active intervention. She believes nature makes the most perfect shapes, and lets it do so. Her passivity to her material results from a deep belief that “in order for humanity to survive, we have to work with nature following the female principle of bending and flowing with nature, not imposing one’s will on it.”<sup>3</sup>

From the 1973 *Fire Curtain* she made in Italy, in which she used high voltage electricity to cause a curtain of inflammable material to burn, Shaffer’s concern has been with the awesome and fearful, transformative power of fire, whatever form

1. Mary Shaffer, “About My Work,” *Mary Shaffer—Glass*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Bellerive Zurich, 1981, p.6.

2. Ibid.

3. Letter to the author, January 22, 1994.





*Ice Tong* 1994 metal & glass 36" x 16" x 8"

Cover: *Wall-Treasure* 1994 glass, metal, wood 29" x 29" x 7"





STITCHED STONE maquette 1994

it takes—molten metal, red hot heating elements, superheated ovens. In some pieces, such as *Hanging Series - Lit*, she has even used the lighting of her pieces to create the wavy patterns of heat rising on the wall behind the work almost as if the glass were afire. Some of that feeling was transferred to the glass and metal pieces she exhibited at the OK Harrie Gallery in New York in the mid-seventies (some as tall as 18 feet high), which dramatically influenced the shape of the contemporary glass movement to a different scale and perception of its emotional potential.<sup>4</sup>

The major portion of Shaffer's work over these twenty or so years has involved both metal and glass, with the metal acting as a framework or foil for the glass. (This is evident in her *Treasure Shelves*, the compartmentalized mini-retrospective she created out of the small, three-dimensional studies, or "test drawings" as she calls them, she has made over the years.) In some pieces the glass seems to billow through the wire grid like a curtain caught in mid air. In others, such as the *Mamoure* series, the glass can seem either to unfurl like fabric or to pour forth like water from the metal. The dialogue between the two materials was given ultimate expression in the *Inversion Series* where the flowing glass is cast into bronze and stands side by side as a pair.

Some pieces (both small and very large) were all glass, but only recently has she confined herself to metal alone on a large scale. Using found metal in the early pieces—nails, hooks, calipers, and wiremesh—served her well when she was invited to participate in the Muriel and Phillip Berman Sculpture Symposium in Allentown, Pennsylvania last summer. It was a natural for her; the only difference was the scale. Using train wheels or giant boiler linings is a big jump from hardware, but with heavy duty equipment to move it around, she was at no disadvantage. With the huge industrial "findings" made available to her she made an amazing five monumental pieces in fourteen days.

Steel columns, conjured up Greece and called for a formal response—hence the title, *Formal Aspects*—and their rigidity demanded its opposite—the stone which seems to flow out between them like her melted glass. A similar use of the materials to contrast flow and stasis is found in another piece, *Fragment*, in which a rectangular "window" frames the "flood" of steel and brick pouring through it. The figurative aspects of boiler lining arcs seemed to demand a narrative and *Triangle* emerged. In it one of three arcs creates tension by pulling away toward a fourth arc, with which it makes an encircling couple. It is a non-resolvable, no exit situation. *End of the Line*, in which four giant train wheels are linked together and turned inward, is about paralysis, since their conjunction cancels their inherent potential for movement. They are on a hill, but can't roll.

In 1990 Shaffer created a fifty foot high column in the three-story atrium of the Cesare Pelli-designed Blumenthal Performing Arts Center in

4. Concurrently with the object work, Shaffer has executed numerous conceptual/environmental pieces that incorporated sound and light to elicit emotional responses in the viewer. It could be said that both avenues of expression came together in her 1993 installation at the American Craft Museum, *Point of View*.





Charlotte, North Carolina, in which glass sections support those in bronze, reversing the customary relationship between glass and metal in construction. Lit from within by fiber optics, that column had a wholly different, technological, spaceage kind of feeling in comparison to her installation at the American Craft Museum in a 1993 where nature held sway. Shaffer set a floor-to-ceiling, multiple-circle column of glass tubes in the center of a darkened space full of fiber-optic filaments timed to light and dim randomly like fireflies in a twilight woods. "Pools" of glass formed below the tubes of the central column. It was at once lyrical and futuristic. Passing through the silent rain or 450 thin, flexible, fiber optic tubes that filled the room was strangely familiar and calming and yet a little unearthly at the same time. Standing inside the column of shifting glass tubes one could imagine the sensation of passing through a window or a wall, or being "beamed up" through a process of physical disintegration and recomposition—which is easy to do in video, but impossible in real life. But then Shaffer's stated intention behind all her work is "to take you out of yourself through visual stimulation to a different plane of understanding."<sup>5</sup>

*April Kingsley is an author and critic living in New York City.*

5. Letter to the author, January 22, 1994.