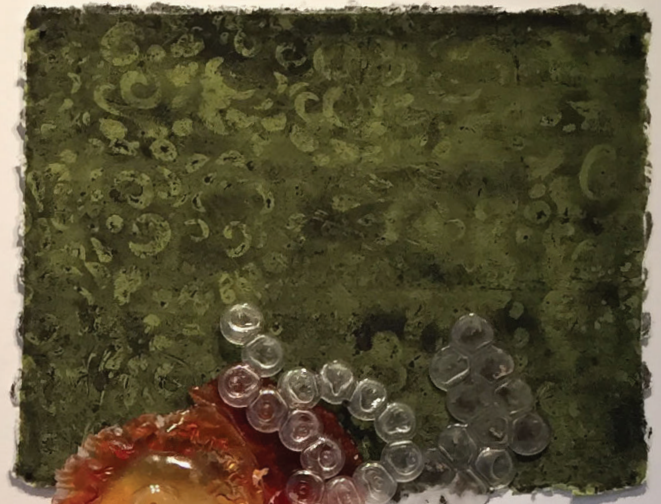


COLLOQUY

ANNA BOOTHE
NANCY COHEN



ARTS COUNCIL
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Anna Boothe and Nancy Cohen: Collaborating on an Ephemeral Outlook

Last year, in 2017, Anna Boothe and Nancy Cohen collaborated on a series of sculptures that owed a lot to the thangka, a type of Tibetan Buddhist painting that represents a Buddhist deity or an image taken from the Tibetan religious imaginary. Buddhist imagery has been a part of American thinking and making for more than two generations now, so Boothe and Cohen belong to a well-established tradition in contemporary American art. Their work, a subtle combination of materials and ideas, feeds the notion of a dialogue--both between the two artists and between the artists and the world, the subjective laboratory that makes up their domain. Buddhist art tends to demonstrate the benefits of loss of self, while contemporary art is often about personal assertion. Trying to merge the two is not without its difficulties! The merger is made more complex by the fact of the two artists' collaboration, which presupposes a shared esthetic and preference for materials, but this in fact may not always be so.

Boothe and Cohen build subtle structures whose accumulated energies link their efforts to feeling and thought that last because of the well-constructed quality of their art. Their ongoing installation *Between Seeing and Knowing* (2017), the inspiration for the Taplin Gallery show, offers mostly organic abstractions, but there are some mechanical-looking images as well—fragments of a divine machine! The randomness of the imagery attains a wholistic unity when looked at from a distance or over time. Boothe and Cohen are artists first and foremost; they have made it clear they are not religious seekers. But Buddhist principles can apply to their art: Buddhism is more about a process—an ongoing searching—than it is about achieving a specific religious insight, and the audience senses, on seeing this wall of discrete images, that the works are intended to be seen as artworks possessing a spiritual outlook. *Petal Pose* (2017) is overtly phallic—to the point of visual unease! It consists of a violently red tumescent head surrounded by a green stem and leaves. The image's literalism disturbs a bit, but it also underscores the fact that the spirituality and natural imagery that Boothe and Cohen make use of can sustain very different points of view (sometimes eroticism can replace piety!). Buddhism's sensitivity toward nature has always been very high, and the two artists make it evidently clear in their work.

The exquisite sculpture *Unseen/Unknown* (2017) consists of a small, white lotus flower flanked on either side by brown leaves, beneath which we see the mixture of a drawing and a sculpture in a neutrally tan color. The recognition of unknowing is always a part of any religious doctrine, and the lotus flower, so central to Buddhist thought and devotion, maintains an air of mystery. This piece, like the rest of the works made by Boothe and Cohen, is exquisite in its facture—as a group, the discrete sculptures meld and offer something larger than a small conglomerate of individual pieces.

Having seen a Buddhist shrine in the countryside in Korea a number of years ago, I can vouch for the overcrowding of the sacred space with repetitive imageries. So the large number of discrete objects in this show play a role in which the entirety of experience is meant to be acknowledged—in the powerful landscape of the show's totality.

There is a larger question to be asked: how is this work contemporary art? It is pretty clear that the abundant use of metaphor found in the works argue for a new way of seeing, just as the cumulative effect of the many small works demonstrates the artists' sly awareness of the many's ability to become one in a sleight of hand that can only be considered currently available. The spiritual aspect of this work is more complicated than it would seem--religion is what you make of it, and the terms of this body of works do tend to address the individual imagination rather than the group's. Additionally, the artists have made it clear that while the thangka influences their formal approach, the tenets of Buddhism are not being assiduously addressed in their art. But that does not mean the individual works of art are lacking in sincerity. The major difference in the works encountered here is that they are abstract, while the imagery of Buddhism is a mixture of the figurative—images of the Buddha—and the abstract--the design of the mandala. Yet this is a time now when claims are being made for contemporary art that cannot be sustained—at least in a spiritual sense. Indeed, in this body of work, the thangka works more effectively as a formal principle than a theological one.

Permutation Drawing I (2017), is a very beautiful gray-and-white monoprint with graphic signs of natural forms that are arranged in curving rows. It rings changes on basic curvilinear shapes, establishing a visual harmony not too easily established in a culture where abstraction is well known. The charm of the work also is not truly in keeping with the rough materialism of much of today's art. *Pollination* (2017), erotically displays two phallic forms, which reach out toward each other. One comes from colored pieces of glass, while the other is part of a piece of transparent glass. For this writer, the pieces underscore the libidinous forms of nature. Desire and spiritual matters both come together in the show. In the long run, what is most important about this body of work is its collaborative manufacture, its spiritual insight, and its interpretation of another culture. These things indicate an openness toward culture and art that invests Boothe and Cohen's work with real dignity and insight. We are living in a time when depth is missing from culture, but the artists here are offering exactly that. We must be grateful for their efforts.

Jonathan Goodman







In 2012, Anna Boothe's and Nancy Cohen's long-term artistic friendship evolved into a collaborative working relationship. Their first major project, an expansive glass installation, "Between Seeing and Knowing," the outcome of a residency at the Studio of the Corning Museum of Glass, was inspired by the artists' joint interest in early Buddhist Thangka paintings – organized symbol-rich scrolls used as meditation aids. This approximate 300-element piece, varying between 30'-50' in length, was first exhibited at Accola Griefen Gallery in Chelsea, NYC in 2013. Expanded in 2017, it was shown at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, and then redesigned for Philadelphia's International Airport, on view from late 2017 through mid 2018. The project

was reviewed in *NYArts* and twice in *Glass Quarterly*. The Accola Griefen exhibition was documented in a catalog with an essay by Susan M. Rossi-Wilcox.

Buttressed by this initial project and the uniqueness of their ongoing conversation, Boothe and Cohen have continued to collaborate. This exhibition includes a series of sculptures and monoprints as well as a new wall installation of two and three-dimensional pieces made specifically for the Taplin Gallery. The new work makes tactile sense of natural, and spiritually metaphoric, order as it seeks a reconciliation between an external and internal comprehension of natural forces.



ANNA BOOTHE

With degrees in sculpture and glass from RISD and Tyler School of Art, Anna Boothe has worked with glass since 1980. Her sculptural works have been exhibited at numerous venues, including the Tittot Glass Art (Taiwan) and Bergstrom-Mahler (WI) Museums, Museum of American Glass (NJ), and Kentucky Museum of Art and Design and are included in the permanent collections of the Corning Museum of Glass (NY), Racine Art Museum (WI) and the Tacoma Museum of Art (WA).

In 2018, Boothe's work has been featured at Albuquerque's Museum of Art, in *Cast* at the Wayne Art Center (PA) and Philadelphia's City Hall and InLiquid Gallery. In collaboration with a draftsman and master perfumer, her flacons were exhibited at Downing Yudain Gallery (CT), NYC's Tambaran Gallery and in Italy's Veneto region 2015-2017.

When exhibiting at the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show and the American Craft Council's Baltimore venue, she received *Best in Glass* and an *Award in Excellence*, respectively.

After 16 years as a Tyler glass faculty member, Boothe helped develop Salem Community College's (NJ) glass art program. She has lectured at numerous venues, including Urban Glass, Pilchuck Glass School, RISD, Rochester Institute of Technology, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Illinois State University as well as at schools in Belgium, Israel, Japan, Switzerland and Turkey.

Boothe served as President of and on the Glass Art Society Board of Directors., and was Director of Glass at Philadelphia's National Liberty Museum where she curated glass exhibits and organized the *Glass Now* auction.

annaboothe.com

NANCY COHEN

Nancy Cohen's drawings, sculpture and installations have been widely exhibited and are represented in important collections, such as The Montclair Museum, The Newark Public Library, The Weatherspoon Art Gallery, and The Zimmerli Museum. She has completed numerous large-scale, site-specific projects including for Thomas Paine Park in lower Manhattan, The Staten Island Botanical Garden, The Noyes Museum, The Katonah Museum and Howard University. She has collaborated with scientists and poets including Shirley Tilghman and Jim Sturm of Princeton University, JeanMarie Harman of Rutgers University and performance poet Edwin Torres.

Her traveling installation *Hackensack Dreaming* (2015-16) was exhibited at UrbanGlass in Brooklyn, New Jersey City University, The Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education in Philadelphia and at Duke University.

She had a solo exhibition at Kathryn Markel Gallery in NYC in 2017. Group exhibitions in 2018 include *WAKE* at Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs in Long Island City and *Mike Childs & Nancy Cohen: A Quiet Place* at Robert Henry Contemporary in Brooklyn.

Cohen's work has been reviewed in books and periodicals, including *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Village Voice*, *ArtNews*, and *Sculpture Magazine*. Awards include fellowships from the NJ State Council on the Arts, the Brodsky Center, and the Pollock Krasner Foundation. She has been awarded residencies at the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Millay Colony, Dieu Donne, Pilchuck Glass School, WheatonArts, Bullseye Glass, and The Tides Institute. Cohen received her MFA from Columbia University and her BFA from Rochester Institute of Technology. She currently teaches at Queens College and Pratt Institute.

Nancymcohen.com



“Always poetically composed on the wall, this magical floating landscape comprised of quasi-abstract and semi-recognizable elements envelopes the viewer in its tranquil beauty.”

Leah Douglas, *Director of Image and Chief Curator*
Philadelphia International Airport

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