



Lou Lynn, 'Tools as Artefacts' (detail), 2008, glass and bronze, wall installation, six of eight components, ht 30 x 1036 x 18 cm

TOOLS AS ARTEFACTS

Lou Lynn's evolving series of glass and metal sculptures meld the age-old human impulse to make tools with the equally primal need to make art.

Text by Robin Laurence. Photography by Janet Dwyer.

THE recent works of Lou Lynn set up a sequence of oppositions between utility and inutility, fragility and strength, modesty and monumentality. They ask us to consider the formal qualities of humble old tools whose uses may be lost to time, but whose physical presence survives. They also pose questions about the handmade versus the machine-made.

A long-time associate of the famed Pilchuk School near Stanwood, Washington, Lynn has lived and worked for nearly four decades in the Slocan Valley, a mountainous region in the southern interior of British Columbia,

Canada's western-most province. In the 1970s, the area attracted a large counter-culture population from both Canada and the US, all seeking an alternative or back-to-the-land way of life. Lynn is one of the thriving community of artists, musicians and writers that grew out of this influx and settled into a productive and enduring rural existence along the area's lakes and rivers. Her home and studio are situated on a wooded acreage, about 60 km from Nelson, the largest nearby town.

Lynn, who pursued part-time tertiary art studies in Alberta, Hawaii and Oregon, began working in glass in



'Wheel', 1992, glass and cast aluminium, ht 30 x 66 x 38 cm



'Artefacts – Group 02', 1992–97, cast glass and copper, varied sizes



'Auger', 2007, glass and bronze, ht 61 x 76 x 24 cm



'Artefacts Group 01', 1992–97, cast glass and copper, varied sizes

the early 1970s. Her first, self-taught explorations were in stained glass, but she quickly became aware of how ill-suited it was to her sculptural aspirations. Classes at Pilchuk enabled her full commitment to sculptural glass in the mid-1980s, whether blown, cold-worked or cast, and she has returned often to the school as an instructor and mentor to others.

In recent years, much of Lynn's art production has been inspired by her personal collection of and research into antique hand tools whose forms are, in her mind and eye, pure and enduring sculpture. These objects range from hooks, reamers and chisels to scrapers, callipers and spades, and their forms, she says, "massage her eyes". Her earlier experiments in combining glass with metal, however, are not directly associated with known and particular hand tools. In some instances, they suggest ancient archaeological finds; in others, they appear to belong to the machine age.

With their axles, disks, cogs and spurs, the works Lynn produced during the early 1990s could be components of some larger, obscure mechanical device. These handsome objects are evidence of her great facility with her materials and the particularity of her finish, even as she experimented with the combination of architectural glass and cast aluminum. The sense of weight and purposefulness in her sculptures of the time is contradicted by the beautiful impossibility of their glass components, which could not withstand the burden of their imagined function. These works also reveal Lynn's ongoing interest in surface texture.

In conversation, Lynn speaks of her "endless search" for her own visual language. Having collaborated with a colleague who operated a foundry and was knowledgeable in cast aluminum, Lynn was able to extend her working vocabulary. However, she was dismayed by the toxicity of the process, in which the carved polystyrene models for her aluminum components had to be burned out of their moulds, and began to experiment with other, more benign combinations of metal and glass.

In a series of small works, executed between 1992 and 1997, Lynn used sand-casting methods to marry glass with copper. The six simple forms that compose *Artefacts* evoke their title – objects unearthed in some nameless archaeological dig. They are generic rather than specific: no exact age, place or culture can be assigned to them.



'Tapered Form', 2004, glass and bronze, ht 97 x 20 x 20 cm

Vaguely suggestive of tools for cutting, pounding and scraping, they also bear the aura of divining or healing. Their textured surfaces imply great age, much of it spent buried in the earth; their shiny surfaces bestow an aura of preciousness, as if they were inlays of silver or mother-of-pearl.

The questions of use and value are persistent themes in Lynn's art. Her *Standing Form* (2001), a dark, cast-glass object whose elongated wedge-shape is both familiar and mysterious, might have been hewn out of obsidian or granite. It imparts a sense of power and permanence. Similarly, *Adze #2* and *Pestle #3* project an aura of ritual or symbolic objects, imposing and yet fragile.

At this point in her career, Lynn had discovered that the lost-wax method of casting glass would enable her to achieve the lines, forms, contrasts and surface finishes that she had been searching for. A little later she began to pair glass elements with cast bronze, as seen in *Double Adze* and *Tapered Form*. These works are keyed to shapes and ideas associated with actual implements, although in *Tapered Form* particularly, Lynn has introduced a scale that disrupts the connection with the hand-held.

By pumping up the size, playing the sturdiness and opaqueness of the metal against the fragility and trans-



'Pestle #3', 2008, glass, bronze and steel, ht 29 x 14 x 17 cm



'Standing Form', 2001, cast lead crystal, ht 43 x 25 x 10 cm



'Fragment', 1990, glass and cast aluminium, ht 28 x 33 x 38 cm



'Adze #2', 2001-06, glass and steel, ht 18 x 20 x 12 cm



'Pronged Spade', bronze, glass, ht 76 cm



'Double Adze #2, bronze and cast glass, ht 76 cm

parency of the glass, and abstracting and exaggerating certain formal qualities of actual tools, Lynn again subverts her work's "implied function". She makes manifest her admiration for the inherent sculptural qualities in the tools she has collected, while troubling the hierarchical relationship between high art and industrial design. At the same time, she asks us to think about the nature of work and the connection between form and function.

In many of her recent works, Lynn has added blown and cold-worked glass to her repertoire. The blown "handles" of the tool-like works she has been making are transparent and evocative of their once-liquid form. Their metal parts, however, reveal the extreme poetic liberties Lynn takes with the tools to which their titles, such as *Scoop* and *Pronged Spade*, allude. Unlikely and exaggerated waves, curls, flanges and prongs add a surreal and occasionally ominous note to the work.

The sculptor's recent wall-mounted installation, *Tools as Artefacts*, comprises 38 individual sculptures and is an interesting return to source. Although again worked in glass and bronze, with curiously looped, twisted, pointed and bent elements, each component assumes the same small scale as a hand-held implement. The major inversion here is that the "handles" are bronze and what would be the metal parts of actual tools are, in many cases, represented by glass. This strategy renders the contrast between materials even greater and the impossibility of their usefulness even more exaggerated.

The impact of the work is cumulative and its reading depends, to an immense degree, on the way it is mounted in the gallery. A grid would call up the history of Conceptualism or some exploration into the typologies of tools, real or make-believe. A single horizontal line, running around the gallery, would suggest a narrative or perhaps evolutionary relationship between the different elements. An organic cluster would evoke a workshop setting, with tools set out on a tabletop or hung on pegboard. Common to all possible installations, however, is Lynn's enduring enquiry into the ways in which we attach meaning to form. In this electronic age, much of our experience is mediated by digital imagery viewed through the screens of computers and television sets. Lynn's sculpture, however, is part of a movement that calls us back to the object, back to a direct, three-dimensional experience of art – and of the world.

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