

Studio

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The **SAIDYE BRONFMAN AWARD** is Canada's foremost distinction for excellence in the fine crafts. This year's recipient is Lou Lynn, whose glass and metal sculptures invite us to look at familiar objects with a renewed reverence.

In Consideration of Everyday Objects

by MARY-BETH LAVIOLETTE

Based on a rural property north of Nelson, B.C., Lou Lynn is this year's 2021 winner of the Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts (Saidye Bronfman). Established in 1977, the award is the pinnacle of recognition and is the only national prize given to an individual who is judged by a jury of peers to have made an outstanding contribution to fine craft.

"The archeology of daily life" is a key phrase in any encounter with one of Lynn's glass and metal sculptures. Her sculptures are sturdy elegant objects, precise and immaculate, whose ancestry can often be traced. Coined by the artist herself, archeology is where it all begins for these one-of-a-kind entities. Except rather than dealing with a conventional "dig" or excavation, Lynn's exploration takes place at thrift stores, flea markets, abandoned sites and yard sales, in search of what was often stored in a toolbox, a sewing basket or kitchen drawer. In other words, useful things: humble but always helpful. Sometimes, Lynn is given things by locals in her rural community. Old tools and other rusty implements from a grandparent's shed, that sort of thing.

Occasionally, other forms of sleuthing are required. Take for example, *Button Box* (2014), a work celebrating the design of carved or molded bake-lite buttons and fasteners of the 1930s and 40s. Fabricated in glass or wood, these exquisite objects are inspired by but *not* replicas of the originals, and trace their origins to research conducted in Portland, Ore. There, the inquisitive Lynn mingled with collectors and scholars of button artistry at the National Button Society conference. Likewise, a similar type of research took place at Ottawa's Lee Valley Tools, where the artist photographed and sketched the company's huge collection of old hand tools.

Art historian and glassblower Bruno Andrus was captivated by the objects in *Button Box*—and he found himself "not the only one to express a desire to manipulate the oversize buttons and share personal memories of domesticity, craft and womanhood."

Significantly, the Bronfman award includes \$25,000 and the acquisition of works for the Canadian Museum of History's wide-ranging Bronfman collection of Canadian craft. Some of Lynn's

wall and pedestal pieces considered by the jury were the 95-piece *Button Box*, along with such notable sculptures as *Enigma* (The Corning Museum of Glass Collection), *Standing Form* (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), *Double Adze* (marking her first use of glass and bronze together), the astonishing installation *Tools as Artifacts* and most recently, *Shovels* (featured in the recent traveling exhibition *Territories in Metal*).

With over 20 solo exhibitions and nearly 100 group exhibitions, Lynn's work has attracted critical attention from many periodicals: *Glass Quarterly*, *Contemporary Canadian Glass*, *Cahiers métiers d'art*, *Galleries West*, *Craft Arts International*, *American Craft Magazine*, *GLASS: Urban Glass Quarterly*, as well as *Studio*. To her credit are also catalogue publications such as *Retro-active*: a seminal touring exhibition where the artist was described as melding "the impulse to make tools with the impulse to make art."¹ More recently in another touring exhibition, "Territories in Metal: Brigitte Clavette, Chantal Gilbert, Lou Lynn, Silvia Taylor," Lynn and the others are noted as being "strong women who work in strong materials and makes strong representational references to objects that encode strong worldviews."²

For Lynn, this perspective includes honouring the materiality and objectness of art; the diversity of the day-to-day and barely regarded; the connective tissue between the past and memory; the waste of the obsolescent and the disposable; the role of functional and non-functional craft in human culture; and the need for aesthetic vision and artisanship.

Lou Lynn

Standing Form, 2001.

Cast glass, 43 x 25 x 10 cm.

PHOTO: JANET DWYER,

COLLECTION MONTREAL MUSEUM

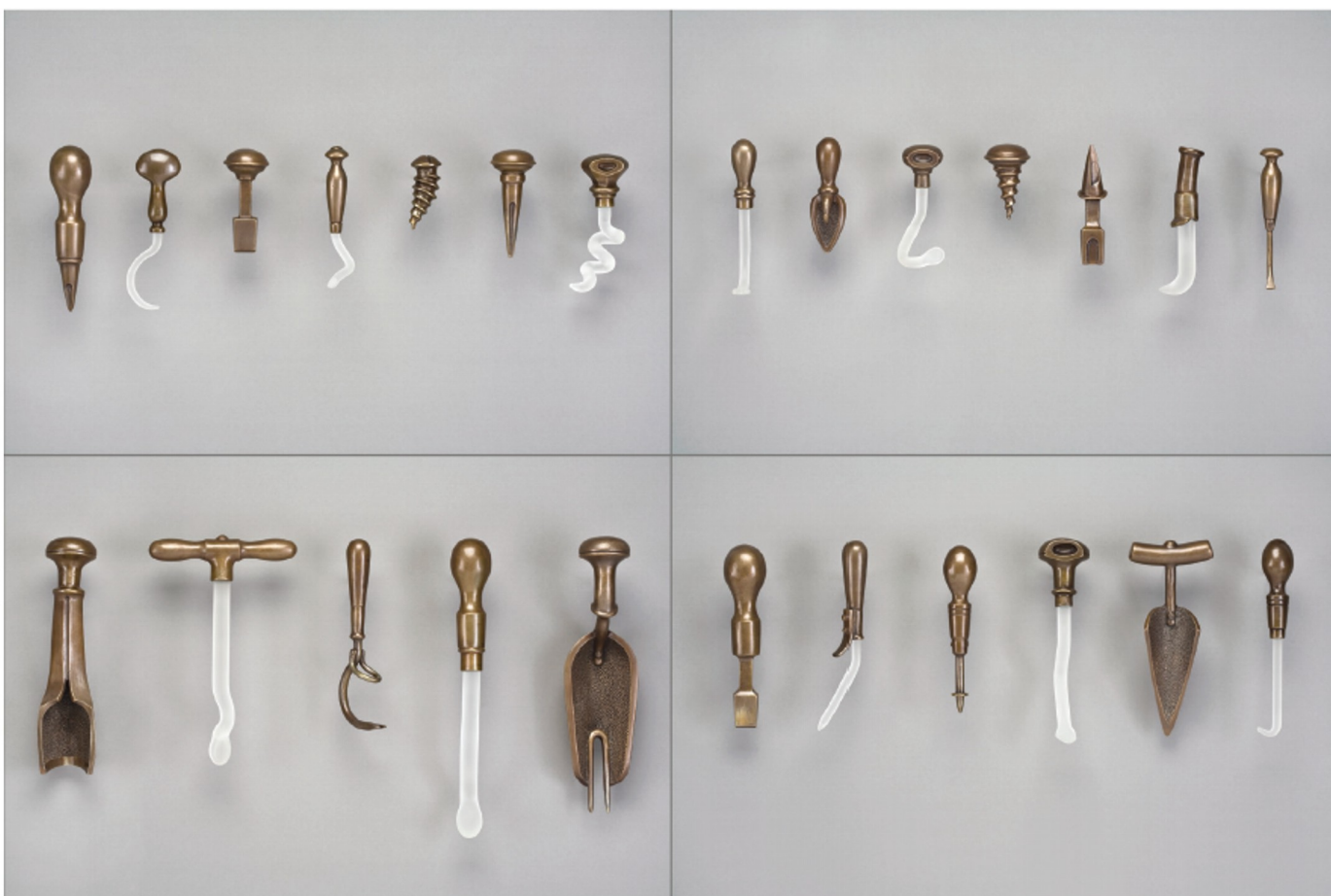
OF FINE ARTS





ABOVE
Lou Lynn
Tools As Artifacts
 (38 Components), 2008-2010.
 Glass and bronze, 3 x 34 ft.
 PHOTO: JANET DWYER
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

LEFT
Lou Lynn
Shovels Triptych, 2018.
 Glass, bronze and steel,
 107 x 23 x 48 cm.
 PHOTO: JANET DWYER
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



The Edmonton-born artist has thoughtfully been engaged with the ecosystem of fine craft since the 1980s. Beginning at the Oregon College of Art & Craft (Portland, Ore.) and then at the Pilchuck Glass School (Stanwood, Wash.) where she participated first in 1985 as a novice and later as a teacher and mentor. For Lynn, Pilchuck was the place where glass, as a hot and viscous medium, was pushed in many sculptural directions.

Even today, her first love is still glass, acting as it now often does in the role of handle or some other helpful component on a pristine make-believe bronze tool or implement.

Over the past 15 years, four discrete but related series have emerged: *Tools as Artifacts* (2008-10), *Utensils* (2011-12), *Buttons and Fasteners* (2014-16) and *Implements & Objects* (2004 to present). With each one, it's like being taken to a different part of the home: the kitchen and sewing room, the garage and garden shed and if there is time, maybe over to a neighbour's place.

Sometimes, glass is given an impossible job by the artist. The installation work, *Tools as Artifacts*, is presented on a wall is a suspect line-up of deceptively simple handheld tools. Fashioned between 2008 and 2010, some of the 38 pieces have a glass component, while others are entirely fabricated in bronze. But any idea there might be of some task for these artifacts is negated either by their delicate glass tip or eccentric form. What could you use them for?

Is Lynn poking fun at old-fashioned functional objects—those devoid of an algorithm for Pete's sake—or is she enthralled by their possibilities for art? My own response is to take another look at what is already there especially in terms of their inherent design and beauty.

In the catalogue for *Territories in Metal*, craft historian Sarah Alford refers to the American design historian Herwin Schaefer and his definition of “the industrial vernacular.” Schaefer observes that we are unable to truly see the common every-day: “so perfect in its adaptation to function that we accept it as if it were a product of nature.” Truer words never spoken.

Alford also observes that “making things is a way of knowing things,” which in Lynn's case is accomplished by giving these old things, as she says, “a slow read.” That quiet introspective process where function, form and design is understood before altering and abstracting, elaborating and amplifying. Lynn takes all of the hard masculine connotations of metal and melds it with a more delicate and transparent medium. Or, is it the other way around? Suffice it to say this particular union orchestrated by the artist—with the assistance of others for the foundry casting of bronze and the blown glass—has attracted and engaged many over the years.

¹Robin Laurence, “Lou Lynn: Form and Function”, *Lou Lynn: Retro-active* (touring exhibition), with curator Helen Sebelius (Nelson, BC: Touchstones Nelson: Museum of Art and History), 2008

²Robert Steven, “Foreward”, *Territories in Metal* (touring exhibition) with essay by Denis Longchamps, PhD & Sarah Alford, PhD (Burlington, ON: Art Gallery of Burlington) 2019 <https://artgalleryofburlington.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TIM-Pub-PRINT-FINAL-WEB.pdf>