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Kathleen Elliot

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(On the cover) Kathleen Elliot, Black Plums, flameworked borosilicate glass, 8" x 4" x 3", 2008.

(Below) Kathleen Elliot, The Conversation, flameworked borosilicate glass, 7" x 3" x 4", 2015.
Photos by Keay Edwards.



Kathleen Elliot

Changing the World
for the Better





(Opposite page) Kathleen Elliot,
Red Plum Cluster, flameworked
borosilicate glass, 10" x 9" x 4", 2006.

(Above) Kathleen Elliot and Sara Sally LaGrand,
Currently Untitled, flameworked soda lime
and borosilicate glass, mixed media,
24-1/2" x 20-1/2" x 4", 2023.

by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

Photos by Keay Edwards

The white haired, beautiful, vivacious, mostly vegan Kathleen Elliot is a driven sculptural glass artist who works with flame-worked glass and sometimes mixed media. She has five key themes, which she works on and revisits at regular intervals. She is philosophically driven and a bastion for women's rights, notices the unnoticeable, and draws her viewers' attention to issues through a practice that exudes patient observation and fidelity. Kathleen Elliot did not immediately leave school and become a glass artist, though. Her parents were blue-collar workers who did not believe that the arts were an appropriate career for a young lady.

Kathleen was born in Ohio, but at a young age her family re-located to the emerging Silicon Valley area in California. Rather than following a traditional path in fine art, Elliot chose another creative route to satisfaction, namely hairdressing. "I found hair-styling a sculptural activity that I devoted myself to for ten years. Thereafter, I had the opportunity to work for Dr. Fernando Flores, an educator, philosopher, and business consultant, from whom I had taken a course. We operated around the themes of communication, commitment, and actioning change from within. I made my way from administration to education to consultancy over a six-year period until I had my second of three children. When my second child arrived, I changed to a job where I was not expected to travel for work."



Kathleen Elliot,
Questionable Foods #2,
flameworked borosilicate glass,
recycled soda cans,
and copper wire,
26" x 24" x 5", 2013.



Kathleen Elliot, Glyphosate Corn #3, blown glass
and Roundup labels, 6" x 27" x 6", 2019.

Playing with Glass

During the period of Kathleen's life while she was working in the semiconductor industry, she was introduced to glass by one of her fellow employees who had a scientific glass setup in his garage. "I found this experience so fascinating. I didn't know anything about glass. We were using clear glass rods, and the first thing I made was a pair of cherries on a stem with a leaf. The whole process just caught me immediately. Glass is so special in its transparency, and one can make simply anything from it!"

That all occurred in the mid-1990's when Elliot was in her thirties and the glass beadmaking scene was well established and thriving in the US. "I discovered glass and tool suppliers, so I bought an annealing kiln, a small glass burner, a sample pack of glass, and a couple of beadmaking books. For the next five years I worked through my books patiently and taught myself how to make beads in my spare time after work. I just tried to make all the beads from the pictures in the books, and I learned a lot of key glass skills by doing that."

Elliot started to turn these glass beads into finished jewelry. Those around her could see how enthralled she had become with the material, and they began to covet what she was creating. "As life sometimes does, everything aligned. The company I worked for was sold, I had my third child, and my husband encouraged me to work on my glass art as a serious career." Kathleen applied to attend Pilchuck, Dale Chihuly's glass school in Washington State, where her first class was with Canadian artist, Laura Donefer.

During Elliot's student slide show on one of the evenings in Pilchuck, Donefer realized that Kathleen was actually a flameworker and encouraged her to next take a class in flameworking. "At the time I actually thought that if I wanted to pursue glass art as a career I had to do furnace work, but luckily Laura Donefer showed me that wasn't the case and that flameworkers can make sculpture too! In 2002, I took a class with Robert Mickelson, and the year after that, I took a class from the wonderful Shane Fero. Robert and Shane were incredibly generous teachers, and they really helped me move forward in my voice and technique."

The Sky's the Limit!

During her Shane Fero experience, everything clicked into place for Kathleen. Her original beadmaking skills had been combined with working in tubing, colored powders, and frits with Mickelson. Now with Shane Fero at the helm, her journey with natural botanicals began in earnest. "I spent a lot of time working on my combinations of glass powders and frits—granulated glass—in order to gain truly realistic representations in my botanicals. I wanted to recreate that organic textural surface as well as the special color combinations in my work. I used to bring home produce from the store and study beetroots in detail, for example, and ask myself what beets really look like. I was endeavoring to recreate that realistic, natural look."

Elliot has achieved something rather unique in her botanicals, namely because soft glass would usually be the natural choice of glass type to use in terms of color palette and workability to create sensuous, curvaceous forms like the work of paperweight maker Paul Stankard. It is much more difficult to achieve a realistic feeling in organic flora representations with the available Pyrex hard glass colors! Hard glass as a type is stiff by nature and does not lend itself easily to sensuousness of form.

After Fero's course, Kathleen Elliot started to develop her *Natural Botanicals* series, and the transition from hobbyist to professional happened with a bang! "I really began to dig into the botanicals, and I didn't show any of my work until I had a piece that I felt I could be proud of putting out into the world. I donated that piece to a museum auction where all the collectors gather. A gallery discovered me at that auction and offered me a show in Chicago, Illinois. Not long after that exhibition, the renowned Traver Gallery contacted me for an exhibition in Tacoma, Washington, and that sellout show facilitated my introduction as a serious artist in the field of art glass."

Feeling Closer to God

Kathleen has taken on a few different themes over her career, the main ones being *Natural Botanicals*, *Imaginary Botanicals*, *Questionable Foods*, *Ours*, and a newer collaborative project based around the feminine fantastic aiming to help make the world a safer and fairer place for women. Elliot elaborated as she unraveled her themes. "I love plants, and I have them all over my house. I speak with my charges, call them my green friends, and find them delightful. I find the world of flora to be heart opening, nurturing, and spiritual. The natural environment reminds me of God, not perceived as a single entity but rather as the opening, the possibility of life and everything in between, a sublime mystery."

Kathleen Elliot, *Questionable Foods*, Bullet #4,
Regret, blown glass and food wrappers,
20" x 4-1/2", 2023.



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Kathleen Elliot,
Questionable Foods #6,
Papaya, flameworked
borosilicate glass, recycled
food packaging, and
artificial sinew,
17" x 22" x 22", 2015.

Elliot appears to relate to the personification of God in all natural things in a way that is similar to ancient and modern beliefs in Mother Nature. To conceptualize, medieval Christians from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries AD thought that nature is not inclusive of everything but lies somewhere in the center, with agents like angels above her and demons and hell below her. "My botanicals are about feeling that spiritual connection. They are a reminder that the daily problems in life are somewhat trivial, as the world is unfathomably more immense than our own personal setbacks."

The *Natural Botanicals* series helps the artist to recognize what we have, enabling her to put her thoughts into context, while her *Imaginary Botanicals*, which are an exercise in curiosity and vision, help her feel the rhythmic buzz of what could and might be. "I devoted ten years of my life to working with a shaman and other alternative spiritual disciplines. During this journey, I met and had the opportunity to work with Carlos Castañeda (1925–1988), an American writer and spiritual leader, who is by origin Peruvian. Carlos taught a discipline of perceiving the world not as a fact but as a mystery." Castañeda often referred to this unknown realm as Non-Ordinary Reality. For the uninitiated, at first a full comprehension of the world consists of an understanding and acceptance of the mundane, or Ordinary Realm. Secondly, through complex intellectual thought in unison with an openly spiritual heart, one can reside in what is known as Non-Ordinary Reality, where one sees, hears, smells, feels, and touches mysteries of the world, of which others are completely naive. "I love that sphere of inquiry and exploration. Curiosity and wonder keep us youthful and alive!"



Pursuing New Series Themes

Elliot chooses not to take in traditional news sources. Instead, she wanders through the internet and selects for herself which streams to consume. "One day on Facebook, I noticed an article about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and consequently the foods that included them. I had never heard of a GMO at that time and looked it up to find out, to my dismay, that it is a world of information fingering pesticides, addiction, obesity, death, and disease. My mind was blown!"

Kathleen Elliot, Questionable
Foods #3, Lucky Charms,
blown glass and cereals,
12" x 9", 2023.

Upon learning what GMOs were, Kathleen started a personal journey working through her own naughty habits and little addictions that went on to inform her artwork. "This knowledge affected me so much that I began cutting up soda cans, sewing them into tin fruits, and hanging them from glass branches. I read that papayas in Hawaii are now genetically modified, so I made a papaya plant with cereal boxes. The project was fun, refreshing, inspiring, and somehow a nice break from creating highly detailed glass objects and became *Questionable Foods*. I continue to explore this topic, not only in my glass but also in my personal eating habits. Six months ago, I became mostly vegan, plus I eat very little sugar or processed flour. The more I learn about food, the more careful I become about what I am powering my own body with."

It appears that Kathleen Elliot's themes work on an organic timeline. Elliot does not simply end a theme and start a fresh one, but she also revisits and refines the topics she is interested in as her knowledge base on the subject widens and deepens over time. "All my themes come from me and my life experiences, and that means these topics are all consistently present for me."

Kathleen's next topic is a little more contentious since it was initially born from a deeply instinctual response to the recent Republican push to wrestle reproductive choices away from the hands of women in violation of their basic human rights. "This bill made me feel like my personal freedom, the freedom of my daughters and granddaughters, and the freedom of all womankind in America was being curtailed once more. It felt like women's rights had been pushed back to the attitudes of the seventies and earlier. In protest, I began making larger-than-life uterususes in celebration of one of the many amazing contributions that women bring to the world. The uterususes are beautiful and are an empowering voice for women and their long journey in search of safety and emancipation."

Kathleen Elliot, *Sugar Children #9*, glass, recycled food packaging, painted wood base, 23" x 31" x 9", 2019.



Quilting Collective

While attending women's rights rallies in the States, it became more and more apparent to Elliot that further afield in Iraq, Afghanistan, and throughout Africa, political upheavals were having a direct and disturbingly negative impact on their female population. This news from abroad sickened Kathleen, who decided to take an even firmer stance on feminism. She has recently begun working on a collaborative project with other talented female artists such as Sara Sally LaGrand, Shelley Muzykowski Allen, and Sibelle Yuksek, among hopefully fifteen to twenty others.

According to Kathleen, "With this work, we want to discuss and explore the problems specifically faced by women and imagine women's enormous potential to create good in the world. Women have such different skillsets, strategies, and focus when they approach problems and opportunities. I would like to see more women afforded the opportunity to become leaders, as I feel this would be the catalyst that facilitates different opportunities and new philosophies." This as yet unnamed project will thoughtfully be realized by 2026 and will tour initially through museum exhibitions and eventually end in a gallery show.

In the words of Kathleen Elliot, "This has been the most wonderful project of my entire career. Working with other women has brought about rich and meaningful conversations about our experiences as women, mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends. The process has, and will continue to be, incredibly heartfelt and meaningful." Not only are Elliot and her collaborators as visual artists able to express important themes associated with womanhood and feminism, but they are also able during the creation to imbue their connected processes with authenticity and integrity.

Elliot herself likens this making process to the traditional sewing circles made famous in the United States, particularly through quilting. Those sewing circles were often charitable and complementary rather than competing, and they gave women the space to act on their concerns to help create a fairer society. Kathleen is excited to realize the development of this upcoming venture. "It's a beautiful project. I can't wait to watch it unfold."

G&A

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Photo by Brent Elliot



Kathleen Elliot and Sibelle Yuksek, Currently Untitled, flameworked borosilicate glass, bricks, and concrete, 13-1/2" x 12-1/2" x 8-1/2", 2023.



Dr. Julie Anne Denton received her doctorate in the combination of sand cast and flameworked glass for artists in 2017. She has been schooled in the Italian flameworking tradition and has worked alongside some of the best flameworking and sand casting artists of the day. Settled in Zurich, Switzerland, Julie runs her design firm, www.atelier315.ch, and virtual school, www.zurichglassschool.com, from the center of the city. She works with a small team beside her who all care deeply about quality.

Julie Anne creates work that resonates beauty, workmanship, and authenticity. Her key themes are people, folklore, nature, and counterculture. She has received worldwide recognition for her storytelling skills as an artist and her technical skills as a glassmaker.

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