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May/June 2023

**Demetra Theofanous
and
Dean Bensen**

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On the cover: Demetra Theofanous and Dean Bensen,
Where the Leaves Meet the Clouds (detail). Photo by Dean Bensen.

Right: Preston Singletary in collaboration with Dorothy Grant,
Naas Shaak Aankáawu du Shát (Wife of the Nobleman at the Head of the Nass River).
Ravenstail weaving by Aay Aay Hans. Photo by Russell Johnson.

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Bertil Vallien

The Existential Artist



Bertil Vallien, Portrait, 2007.

Photo by Goran Ortegren.



*Bertil Vallien, Blues III, sand cast, cut and polished,
195 mm x 195 mm x 190 mm, 2019.*

Photo by Goran Ortegren.

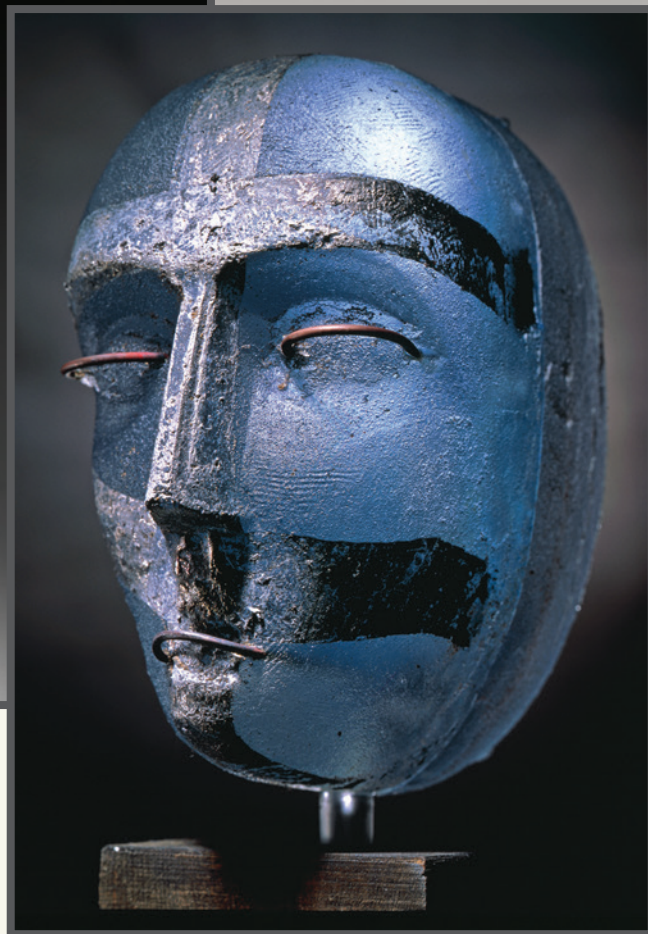
by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

Inventor, visionary, commercial designer, artist, and visual poet! Are we defining a Romantic Blakean figure from 19th century England? A soul concerned with chimney sweeps, poverty, and worshipping God in the public house? No, these are just a few choice words that aptly describe a living, breathing pioneer artist who predominantly, but not exclusively, works in glass. To be more precise, he is known as the creator and consequent grandfather of sand casting with glass.

Bertil Vallien, born in 1938, is one of Sweden's most famous designers and glass artists. Vallien studied at the University of Arts, Crafts, and Design and graduated as the school's best student in 1961. He arrived at Kosta Boda in 1963. Since then, he's won numerous awards and prizes around the world. The Imagine Museum named him Artist of the Future, he received the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences medal for his work as a designer, and in 2002 he was presented with the Visionary Award from the Glass Art Society.



*Bertil Vallien, JANUS DREAM, sand cast cut and polished, 230 mm x 135 mm x 280 mm, 1999.
Photo by Goran Ortegren.*



*Bertil Vallien, Blue Head, sand cast, 210 mm x 125 mm x 210 mm, 1999.
Photo by Goran Ortegren.*

In 2023, Vallien celebrates his Diamond Jubilee working for Orrefors Kosta Boda in Sweden as house designer and artist in his own right. His 60th anniversary culminates in three exhibitions curated throughout the year. "This is important for me. I consider myself to have two professions. One is being a commercial designer, and the other is being an artist. I always paid for my freedom to create unique work by being a rather successful designer. I still want to be involved with designing products that keep the factory running." Bertil Vallien is a very personable, humble, and interested gentleman who doesn't shy away from the bigger questions in life.

Discovering a Life in Glass

Where did it all begin for Vallien? "My father was a lay minister, and I was brought up in a rather strict household. I experienced a lot of guilt in my youth, as so many freedoms taken for granted today were forbidden for myself and my siblings. I still carry that guilt around with me, and I suspect the melancholia inherent within me can be observed in my artwork."

Bertil left home at fifteen and attended art school to study ceramics in Stockholm. Shortly after he graduated, he was whisked away to the sunny climbs of Los Angeles, California, to work in a small ceramics factory.

"I was engaged in numerous lousy jobs there, until suddenly the workshop owner discovered, 'This guy has some talent.' I was moved up to designer, and my creations became very successful for the company. Thereafter they gave me the freedom to run my own studio in conjunction with my design work, and that enabled me to have my first ceramics exhibition.

"To give you an idea of the timeline, on the opening day of my show, the gallery next door opened with Andy Warhol's first exhibition in Los Angeles in February 1962. My time in the States became very successful, and I entered a prestigious national competition undertaken by the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York. I entered my stoneware and won first prize. My award-winning work was shown in the Ceramic National Exhibition in 1963."

It is not unusual for a ceramic artist to turn to glass and vice versa. Somehow these two vocations are intrinsically linked. Even after Vallien chose glass, he kept his ceramics studio for another fifteen years. "While I was in Los Angeles, I was offered a job to work beside Erik Höglund who was the most famous glass designer in Sweden at that time. Prior to my stint in the States, I had completed a short apprenticeship with Höglund. I accepted the position with the idea of dividing my time equally between working as a glass designer for six months and spending the other half of each year with my personal work in ceramics. An opportunity arose at Boda to take over a rundown factory and turn it around. I just loved that, and it is how I really started to work with glass! It is there that I built my ceramics studio with my wife, Ulrica Hydman Vallien, right next to the factory."



The Importance of Design

The factory/designer model is sadly little utilized in 2023, and it is fascinating to hear how working in this tried-and-tested model helped Bertil in the creation of his personal work. "I gained a lot of respect by being a profitable designer and became important to the factory for that reason. Therefore, they allowed me to take as much time as I wanted in the hot shop and the cold working departments. It wasn't easy in the beginning because I was a disturbance. My experiments with sand casting were so far away from Orrefors' elegant way of working. My artistic freedom was paid for because of my successful designs, and thereafter my artwork became successful too."

Bertil Vallien recalls, "This was an easy step when you consider that metal has been cast in sand for centuries. At first, I was thinking of being a designer just to earn a living because my passion was ceramics. Once I found this way of casting glass in sand, it was such a fantastic feeling of spontaneity to be able to use my hands, to be close to the molds. This discovery affected me on such a fundamental level that the ceramics kind of faded away, and since then my focus has been on glass." Bertil's face, youthful for a man of his years, lights up like that of a child. "Just to have nicely mixed, untouched, sieved sand ready in its box, waiting for my hands to press down the surface, negatively creating in the sand, it is so freeing. There are so many possibilities. I love it!"

Left to right: Bertil Vallien, Hidden Code I, sand cast, partly copper, 550 mm x 150 mm x 140 mm, 2023.

Photo by Roland Feith.

Bertil Vallien, Hidden Code III, sand cast glass. leather corset, 800 mm x 130 mm x 150 mm, 2023. Photo by Roland Feith.

Bertil Vallien, Epilogue, sand cast with off-hand details, 200 mm x 150 mm x 215 mm, 2021.

Photo by Sander Copier.

Searching for Answers to Visual Patterns

The power in Vallien's work is derived from theme, content, and subsequent display. What makes the artist? When asked why and how the spark of creativity awakened and to what end, he replied, "It has to do with who you are, what personality you are, your upbringing, and your views on life. I dislike glass for many reasons because it can be so seductive, so decorative. I play with those qualities as a designer. Most people like the way glass shines, how it reflects light, and how it is like jewels. With my upbringing in a fundamentally religious home, I have always been concerned with the more existential questions. Those are the personal factors that have affected my artistic voice."



Bertil Vallien, Untitled, sand cast, partly cut and polished, metal, 210 mm x 470 mm x 210 mm, 2009. Photo by Goran Ortegren.

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Bertil Vallien, Aera II Map, sand cast, partly cut and polished, 630 mm x 630 mm x 100 mm, 1991. Photo by Goran Ortegren.

Bertil's quest to pose questions to the cosmos in search of answers means that there are visual patterns throughout his themed work. His questions are concerned with the value, purpose, and meaning of life. "I am inspired by things I read or listen to in daily life. Music is an inspiration for me, but there is no single source. I believe in starting your work with one idea, then building layer upon layer over that idea, until by the end it is difficult to envision the origin.

"For example, the heads I create were originally derived from a news story pertaining to the general area where I live in Sweden

in Okno. The story tells of a teenager who in 1875 fell on the ice and bumped her head. This fourteen-year-old girl went home, consequently went to bed because she didn't feel well, and slept for 32 years. To a greater or lesser extent, this story is a true one, and in 1908 the sleeping beauty awoke at the age of 46. They asked her where she had been, and the now-woman could only remember that there was a big darkness and blue men. The story was shrouded in mystery, and the idea of blue men in this girl's dreams affected me so profoundly. This peculiar tale is where my *Head Series* was begotten."



Bertil Vallien, *Area II Map IV*, sand cast,
630 mm x 630 mm x 100 mm, 2008,
Photo by Goran Ortegren.

Creating an Alphabet in Metaphors and Symbols

The thing about Bertil Vallien's work is that it touches the viewer in a deep and soul-enhancing way. Vallien's sand casts give viewers the sacred space to reflect and perhaps find their own answers to the questions he poses in his artwork. "I believe I have created an alphabet of metaphors and symbols that are easily understood, such as the house, the ladder, the doorway, the key, the never-ending spiral. I was inspired the other day by an interview with David Bowie. The interviewer asked how he wrote *Space Oddity*, and Bowie told him that he wrote his favorite words on pieces of paper, held them aloft, and threw them to the table. A sentence was born that could never have been imagined otherwise." This is chance art, and it was originally conceived of and refined by the avant-garde Dadaist movement (1916–1924). "I very much like that because I sometimes work in the same way as Bowie. Much of my alphabet is easily understood, and sometimes I mix the symbology randomly. It is easy for anyone to see each word separately. Thereafter, the imagination begins to form its own sentences!"

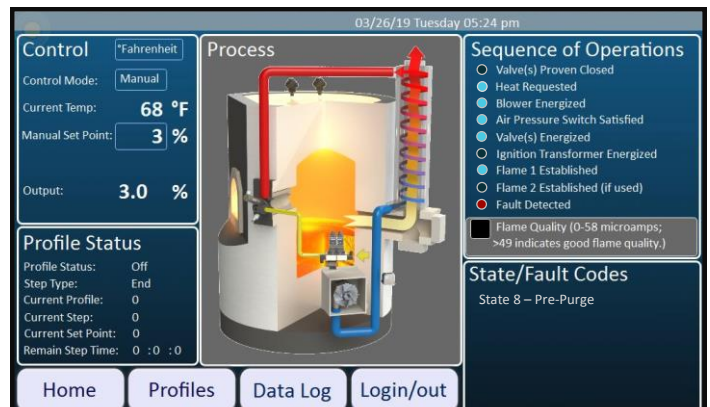
Perhaps the most famous of Vallien's collections is his *Boat Series*. "The boat, for me, has become what the canvas is for a painter. I have always been fascinated by boats, for their beauty of form and for what they signify—adventure, travel, a livelihood, birth and death—a symbol belonging to our collective unconsciousness. It is an archetypal form." Vallien's boats give the feeling of transition in a physical undertaking or on a metaphysical plane as if it is a transcendental journey to the underworld. This funerary reference spans the rites of world culture and spirituality. "The first boat I made from glass was in honor of a son we had. Our child drowned when he was only two years old, and with the first boat, I wanted to send a message to him. That is how it started."



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Bertil Vallien, Resting head,
sand cast with inclusion,
200 mm x 360 mm x 270 mm,
1993. Photo by Goran Ortegren.

The Joy of Spontaneous Art

Currently Bertil is creating a new body of work based on his older *Map Series*. "One of the things that really fascinates me about glass is the danger when it is hot, the beauty of the molten lava, then the fantastic transition. When the pieces come out of the annealer, they are like ice. My new *Map Series* documents art in the same way that archaeologists document their work. The archaeologists of the future will take square zones of earth that have either been frozen by ice or melted into glass. In these zones, they find cultural objects and clues to our existence, filters from nuclear power plants, human remains, or a Swiss army knife. I am creating blocks 8 inches square with the sandy surface left on top. As human beings, we are mostly unaware of what a fragile surface we are living on, and we do not realize what is going on underneath. I have polished some of the sides of my zones indicating the depth of the unknown, the ocean, worlds beneath us."

As a pioneer in glass, through sand casting Bertil Vallien has opened up new ways to become more personal with glass and express oneself artistically. Sand casting gives a freedom of expression that eclipses other glass disciplines. "Sand casting is so close to drawing. It has such spontaneity, not just the finished result but also the process. I am very happy to be a glass artist and be part of the glass art movement because this camaraderie, a willingness to share, is so obvious within the glass community. I just love that! I do a lot of drawings and paintings and sculptures in other materials too. I need to express myself on paper though. That is always the starting point. It is wonderful to have a nice sheet of white paper in front of you and a pen. Entire worlds open up. You just have to draw them."

Capturing the Human Spirit

Vallien's work is imbued with a personal, symbolic visual language. His oeuvre is so strong that the works take on an archetypal quality. Clarification of speech is a truly rare gift when it can transcend age, culture, and the spoken word. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung's archetypal theory is based on the idea that the human being is not a blank slate when that person is born. In *Structure of the Psyche*, Jung describes twelve human archetypes, such as the hero, that represent universal human patterns. Much in the same way that we inherit instinctive behaviors, Jung believed we inherit ancestral memory. Vallien's primordial imaginary language speaks to the collective elemental images and impulses that we unconsciously hold in our heads, and his work serves as a fundamental foundation describing what it is to be human.



For Kosta Boda, Vallien designed the collections *Picnic* and *Château*, which have become two of the world's best-selling handmade glassware collections ever. Plans are currently in the works to present a curated exhibition of Vallien's choice pieces in New York City during the fall of 2023 to celebrate the life and work of this incredible glass art pioneer.

G&A

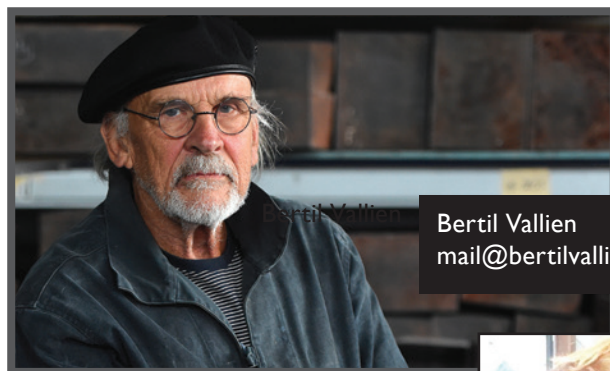


Photo by Sten Rosenlund

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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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