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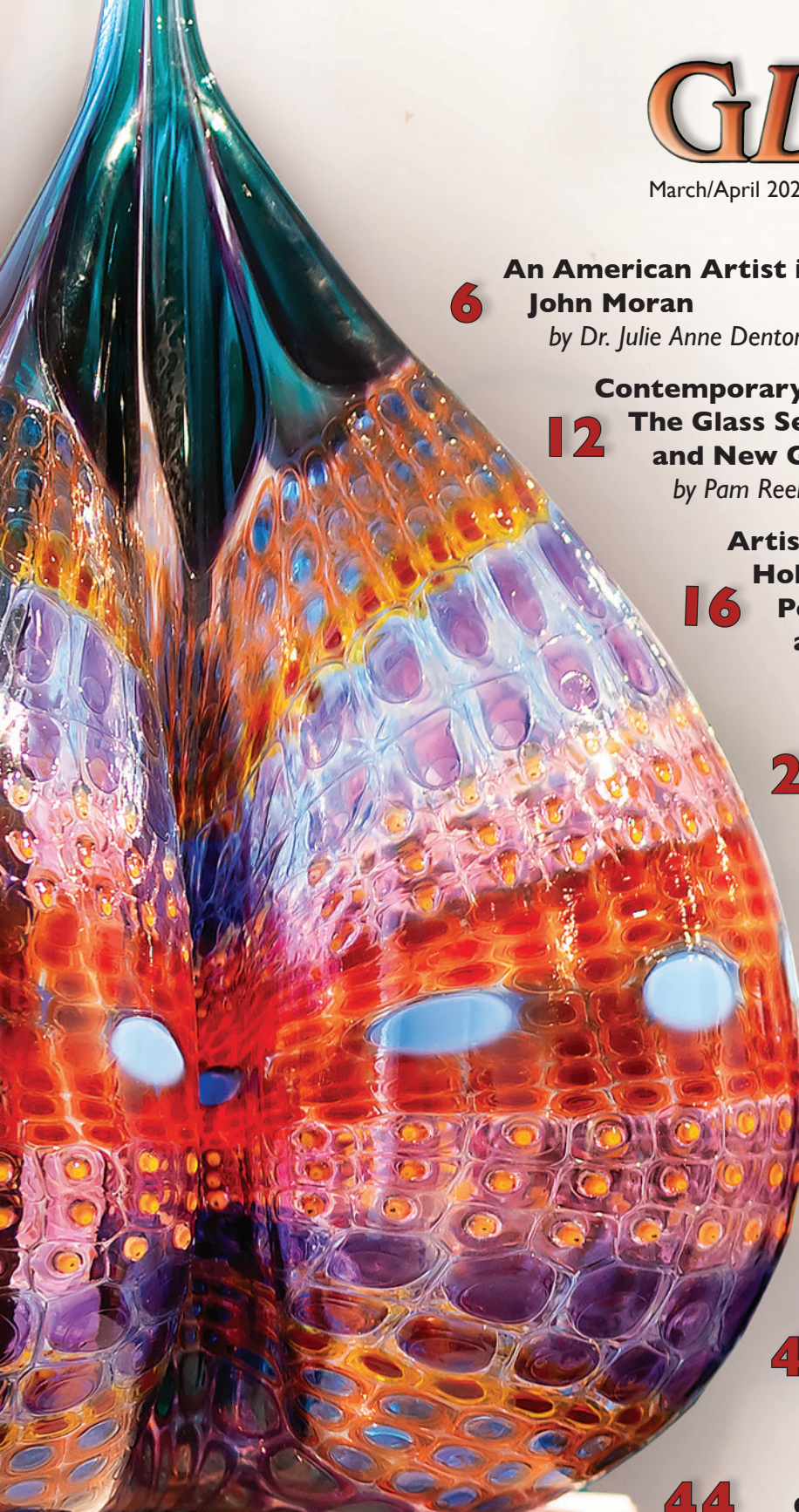


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Jennifer Caldwell
and Jason Chakravarty

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Photo by Tami Meader*

*Table of Contents; Stephen Rolf Powell,
Photo courtesy of the GLASS National Art Museum*

An American Artist in Ghent



*John Moran, Sale of the Deathman, hot sculpted glass,
mixed media, 48" x 48" x 40", 2013. Photo by Karel De Bock.*

by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

Looking at the smiley faced John Moran, you wouldn't realize that he is a brave American-born sculptor working predominantly in glass. Moran is a risk taker and has a personal mastery over the art of visual storytelling. Apologies in advance for the spoiler, but he is the winner of the 2022 third season of the smash Netflix show, *Blown Away*. For those who are as yet unfamiliar with the show, *Blown Away* is a reality program that pits ten experienced glassblowers against one another to win a career-enhancing prize worth the equivalent of \$60,000 and includes a one-week artist's residency at the renowned Corning Museum of Glass in upstate New York.

*John Moran, Wretched Refused, detail
hot sculpted glass, mixed media, 48" x 24" x 2",
2017. Photo by Amber Vanbossel.*



*John Moran, New Times Roman, hot sculpted glass,
mixed media, 72" x 52" x 48", 2013. Photo by Alex Hogan.*



John Moran, *American Idols*, hot sculpted glass, mixed media, varied dimensions, 2014.
Photo by www.decontemporary.com.

Speaking with John, he explains a little more about his personal experience during the competition. "It was so much fun. I was a fan of the show already. When I arrived for the filming, I realized that I knew half of the contestants, which made the experience a little like a family reunion. I didn't feel that we were competing against one another. The experience felt more like we were simply there to do our best and make the work, and that creates a more convivial working atmosphere in general. It was a great experience."

Simply Blown Away

As previously mentioned, Moran won the entire competition, and one wonders if his working life has been changed in any meaningful way since the competition ended. As John shared, "Winning *Blown Away* created a monetary cushion that has allowed me to continue to follow my pursuits more intensely as an artist. I made a meaningful shift after *Blown Away* and dropped much of the fabrication work that I undertake for other artists. I have also adjusted the main focus of my workshop in Ghent, Belgium, from events and workshops to the creation of artwork."

their passion is constrained by the necessity to diversify and can feel suffocating. "I am in a state of transition since the positive repercussions from *Blown Away* are still vibrating through my working life while opening doors to new, exciting opportunities."

Bringing Realism to Sculpting in Glass

Although based predominantly in Belgium, Moran currently divides much of his time between the UK and the USA. "I relocated to Belgium in 2013 some years after completing a residency at the state-run glass program, IKA (Instituut voor Kunst en Ambacht). I opened my hot glass studio Gent Glas, a nonprofit, public-access workshop, not long after arriving in Belgium." Ghent is the third largest city in Belgium after Brussels and Antwerp. In Ghent they speak Flemish, which is basically a dialect of Dutch, as opposed to French, which is spoken in other parts of Belgium. Ghent is a thriving, casual university town that perhaps errs on the side of the conservative. It has an extremely well-preserved historic center dating back to the late Middle Ages, which now makes Ghent an important destination of tourism. "My dream has always been to divide my time fifty-fifty between the States and Europe."

John started in glass at Tyler School of Art and Architecture at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the 1990s. He initially studied painting and drawing. "My resident advisor at the time told me that I should endeavor to take a glassblowing class. Ché Rhodes, a graduate student of that glass program, really encouraged me, and it wasn't long before I was hooked."

"There was an amazing and overflowing faculty there at that time. The faculty members, including Jon Clark, Anna Boothe, Will Dexter, Dan Cutrone and Mark Kobatz, were very generous to me as well as with the input they gave to their students. During that time, there was not much hot glass sculpting happening anywhere, but that is where my interests lay. When I had studied painting, I was focused on realism and the figure, and I wanted to bring this focus to my glasswork. The only artists I knew of who were sculpting in glass at that time were the likes of Pino Signoretto and William Morris. For the first couple of years of my undergraduate studies, I worked hard to become a good glassblower like Dante Marioni. I took a goblet-making class toward the end of my third year. Although my goblets were awful, my stems were well made and exciting, and that is what kick-started my trajectory toward hot sculpting in glass."

Mexican Baroque

In 2001, John was lucky enough to take a class with the De La Torre Brothers, and his working life and oeuvre were exponentially enriched after this phenomenal experience. The De La Torre Brothers are known for making large sculptures predominantly in glass. One might call their style Mexican Baroque. "After taking the class with Jamex and Einar, I realized just how much I could do by combining glass with mixed media."

*John Moran, Yearning to Breathe,
hot sculpted glass, mixed media,
72" x 180" x 72", 2023.
Photo by Nathan J. Shaulis.*



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John Moran, The Hollowed Family, hot sculpted glass, varied dimensions, 2022. Photo by Mike Van Clevon.

In 2002, Moran started gainful employment as a freelancer. “I worked as a glassblower’s assistant for a couple of years in Philadelphia. Thereafter, I worked in a metal fabrication shop with a host of other glassblowers who felt like a little pivot in direction. After working in the metal fabrication shop for a while, I realized I needed a change, so I moved to China for a year in 2004 to 2005. The China experience gifted me with new perspectives concerning the myriad issues wrapped up in personal identity, and it changed my thought processes for the better. By the end of my year in China, I had recharged my artistic battery and was ready to start once more with a fresh perspective on life and my artwork.”

Finding Hyperrealism within Hot Glass Sculpture

Moran worked as the fabricator for Doug Ohm at Ohm Equipment in New Jersey next door to Wheaton Arts, or Wheaton Village. In the evenings John created his friggers, which allowed him to push his mastery of the material further. Frigger is British English term for an object made by a glassworker on his own time. “I spent a lot of my evenings after work refining the realism of my glass figures. Looking back at these pieces now, they weren’t very good, but they were the precursor to my massive jump into hyperrealism in hot glass sculpture. At the end of my time with Doug, I had been awarded a six-week residency at Wheaton Arts where I began making the president series, *American Idols*. That was a catalyst for me, artistically speaking, and I am still working with this series to this day.”

The artist’s Wheaton residency was finished in October 2009, and in early 2010, John Moran completed his two-month residency at IKA as previously mentioned. During that time, Moran was accepted for a postgraduate degree at Illinois State University in the USA, and he spent three years there refining his craft. “During my master’s degree, I finished the presidents project and exhibited

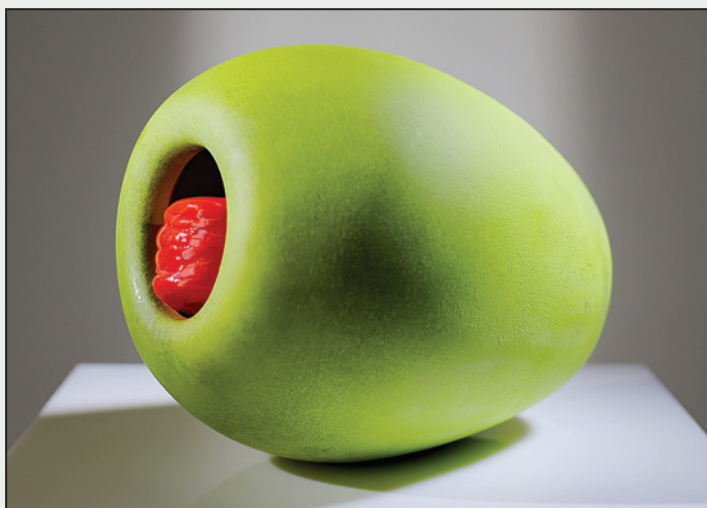
it, and that is when I began creating the life-size figurative work including *Sale of the Deathman* and *New Times Roman*. That was the first time I not only had time to experiment in the hot shop, but I was also able to utilize the studio space for mixed media and work with resins, welding, etc. It was an exceptionally creative boost for me and my work in those years.” After his postgraduate degree, John relocated permanently to Belgium.

Memento Mori

Regarding his themes, John Moran is a self-confessed socially and politically motivated artist. “I grew up in the 1990s, which appeared to me to be a very politically motivated decade. As the final decade of the 20th Century comprised my formative years, I could not help but be affected by the tone of the popular culture that surrounded me. I have always created conceptual work. As my mastery of glass and other materials has developed, so, too, has a deeper refinement of my thoughts and ideas as a conceptual artist grown.

“As well as the life-size sculptures I create, I use a lot of toys in my work too, such as Mattel’s Fisher Price figurines set up in a diorama crime scene, for example. My work is about people, society, and existentially, the human condition, our thought processes—the whys of what we do. Life and death have always been a prevalent theme for me because both states are so ephemeral. I often pit the idea of life and death against one another, but the main concept for me is mortality.”

John’s father died young when John was only ten. “Many people around me have died, and it’s not something I am nostalgic about. I accept it and move on. On a personal level, I find this reaction of mine quite strange, comparatively speaking. It has shaped me, and I feel that is why I have the theme of mortality consistently running through my work.”



John Moran, A Little Dirty on the Side, 2021.



John Moran during the judging for A Little Dirty on the Side, 2021. Both above photos by David Leyes, Marble Media, for the Blown Away series.

Drawing Historical Parallels to Contemporary Themes

A lot of religious iconographies are used in Moran's work, but he says of himself that he is not religious in any way. He was brought up Catholic and was fascinated by Bible stories as a child, but John finds the heavy symbolism that is imbued in religious iconography to be a helpful tool in his own artistic narrative. "Issues, be they existential, social, or political, are so often a repetition with extra bits of what has gone on before. With my work, I want to draw an historical parallel to the contemporary stories that I cover. I utilize religious symbology to contextualize and counterbalance the cyclical nature of the unfolding current events."

It is important to Moran to create observational work that enables the viewer to question and converse in a safe space. Some say his work is brutal, but for Moran his work is a gut reaction to daily affairs that are far more gruesome. "What am I supposed to make—dolphins and flowers, because life is supposed to be beautiful? I don't think so. I simply create commentaries on what is happening around me."

"My work is not meant to be shocking. It is meant to encourage people to pay attention. It is a catharsis for me, too, that helps me to process some of the more disturbing things I see. I am not retelling the news with my work. I am rather making a statement based on the feelings I experience when I am exposed to the likes of a school shooting or mass manipulation by the media machine."

Essentially, Moran's work is about connection, although all human animals have a different experience of the world and what is around them. Nevertheless, we all bleed when we are cut, and John's work endeavors to distill our empathy sometimes in subtle ways and at other times like a punch in the gut. "I do not purport that my work will change the world, but if I can create a shift in the minds of a few, I feel that my work here is done. In my opinion, the point of art is to offer the subjective observer another viewpoint, and that does not have to be political. It can also be a purely visual experience."

The Final Plan

Between 2019 and 2021, John undertook and completed his doctoral studies in English at Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Fine Art in Wroclaw, Poland. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his topic was Political Art in Public Space. When asked what his plans and aspirations are for the future, Moran is humble.

"I would like to relocate part time to the US, and I wish to move in the direction of public art commissions. I am itching to get back to the larger-scale work that I have created in the past. I am in the process of directing my work toward the contemporary fine art world. Based on the themes I work with, comparatively speaking, the artworks I create can be contextualized in a clearer way in the world of fine art, although I will always be a glass artist who loves his worldwide glass family."

G&A

Visit www.habatat.com/artist/226-john-moran or www.backdoorart.com to view more of John Moran's work posted online by his representative, Habatat Galleries Detroit.



**John Moran, PHD
Gent Glas**
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Belgium



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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