

# Katya Izabel Filmus

## Navel gazing

by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

I first met the Israeli artist Katya Izabel Filmus in 2007 at Yilmaz Yalcinkaya's teaching facility, the Glass Furnace in Beykoz, Turkey. She was participating in a hot glass casting course with another instructor, and I was teaching flameworking. From the moment I met her I could see the drive etched into her face, and that has not changed even in 2021. Sitting opposite each other in her studio, her eyes contemplated me intensely as if she could taste my innermost thoughts and gaze into my soul—searching, keen, alive!

### From Glass Revulsion to Compulsion

Katya Izabel Filmus is a 40-something fine artist living and working in Tel Aviv, Israel, who predominantly works in kiln cast glass. She is a master mold maker, and during her lengthy career in glass, she worked on complicated projects for Ai Wei Wei through the National Glass Centre in the UK and Berengo Studio in Venice, Italy. She has worked for Glenfiddich, the Scottish whiskey producer, creating a series of life-size stag heads in clear acid-polished solid lead crystal, which can be seen to this day in major airports throughout the world, including my home airport, Zürich Flughafen in Switzerland. These are but a select few of the prestigious commissions she has been cherry picked to work on.

When asked where it all began, Katya answered that she hated, *hated*, **hated** glass to begin with. "In Israel a bachelor's degree takes four years, and I completed my degree in ceramics and sculpture. In the first year you must try every process before you start to focus in the years to come. When I worked with glass, I was coming away from each class with new burns, cuts, and even stitches, and at the end of the first year I vowed never to touch that awful material again. I concentrated on ceramics and sculpture. My degree show encompassed an installation of latex 'human' skins that had been peeled from the body."

*Katya Izabel Filmus, Mila, kiln cast glass, 83 cm x 40 cm x 36 cm, 2021.*

*Photo by Yona Shlay.*



I find this such a strange thing for her to say, because I know from having spent many hours with Katya that glass is a material that delights and excites her. When asked how she went from revulsion to compulsion, she explained, "As I finished my bachelor's in 2002, a nonprofit art organization rehabilitating children at risk approached me to work for them, initially as a teacher. The medium they were using to get through to the youths of Jerusalem was glass!

"With the little knowledge I had of the material, I endeavored to find out everything I could in a bid to work out what would be the best process to work with. Due to that, I am mostly self-taught, and due to the mold making skills I acquired while studying sculpture, it was only natural that I gravitated toward kiln forming. I had to learn the characteristics of glass and what makes it different from other materials. Since then, I have made every possible mistake in glass—every *single one!*—and I learned from that the most. That was a funny journey. It's ironic that I hated glass that much in the beginning."

After her first year in the nonprofit as an instructor, Katya was given a studio in their factory to work on her own practice and create designs on behalf of the charity. "For the studio, I was designing plates from float glass that were screen printed." Luckily for Katya, all of the tools and facilities were provided, and she was given the freedom to do what she wanted. Her artistic journey went on from there, and after attending Pilchuck in 2006 as a student and later as an artist in residence in 2008, she left the company in 2009 to complete a master's degree at the National Glass Centre/University of Sunderland, UK.

### **Expansive Kiln and Cold Working Techniques**

During a short tour of her large studio in Tel Aviv, Katya described her techniques. "I use all the applications that are performed in a kiln—mostly glass casting, my specialty, plus slumping, fusing, and a bit of *pâte de verre* too!" When asked if she also uses cold processing techniques, she replied, "Yes, all types of cold working. For removing glass reservoirs, I use a saw. I am hand grinding and polishing, have recently bought a rociprolap, and have a linisher, which I love. I use a pneumatic hand grinder. Other equipment I have in the studio include a sandblaster, numerous kilns, and all of the other basic requirements involved with kiln forming such as a steamer for lost wax casting and a good deal more besides."

Katya's spacious studio is a dream for any artist working in glass. While there, we passed some of the pieces she was currently working on that had just come out of the kiln the day before. They were shaped like enormous capsules, the kind that would normally contain medicine, created in two parts that fit perfectly together using a mold-maker's key system. According to Katya, that is "challenging to do but so satisfying!"

### **Finding Inspiration and an Artistic Language**

As we reflected on her new work, this intelligent, proud woman shared where her artistic language and inspiration are derived. "My work deals with identity and memory and the correlation between the two. I use the body a lot, because it is indicative of my themes. The body is a biological marker itself, but it also carries marks of memory such as scars, for example, that every individual accumulates over time. These marks are a map to your life, and these memories create part of your individuality. Memories are integral to the formation of personal identity in the same way that the history of a nation constitutes its national identity. My work is a journey that resides in that space between the two." This deep subject is close to Katya's heart.



*Katya Izabel Filmus, Omphaloskepsis 4/4 Violin, kiln cast glass, 58 cm x 20 cm x 10 cm, 2020. Photo by Yona Shlay.*



*Katya Izabel Filmus, Omphaloskepsis Backpack, kiln cast glass, 32 cm x 35 cm x 17 cm, 2020. Photo by Yona Shlay.*



Katya Izabel Filmus, *Kmusot, kiln cast glass*, 160 cm x 100 cm x 20 cm, each capsule 36 cm x 12 cm, 2021. Photo by Yona Shlay.

Delving a little further, I asked her to inform me a little about what she is currently working on. “I am remaking *Pain Killers* a piece exploring personal and national identity I made in 2010 that was sold to the Tyne and Wear Museum, UK. The work is comprised of eight glass pill capsules that function like time capsules. Each pill has a different personal component inside such as my hair, a cast of my navel, nail clippings, etc.—elements that designate identity.

“Written on the plinth is my Israeli identity number. Now that I have moved back to Israel in 2018, I wish to showcase my British identity that I have developed in tandem with my native country. I am creating ten pills, some of which allude to the time I spent in Britain, such as my English national security number and my handwriting in English. These all combine to create an identity, a unique self-portrait. These portraits show a dichotomy between the Israeli piece from 2010 and the new British one, a natural progression of the self. I want to express that our identities are in a constant state of flux.”

A lot of forensic material is incorporated into Katya’s pills. “In a thousand years’ time, society will have all the information preserved in my pills to clone me. People might be cloned in the future, but the one thing they wouldn’t have is a navel.”



Katya Izabel Filmus, *Glenfiddich Stag, kiln cast lead crystal*, 90 cm x 85 cm x 70 cm, 2010–2014. Photo by Chris Blade.

Katya also happens to be a very talented cello player, an instrument she took up seriously when she moved to the UK. I pointed out to Katya that upon moving back to her home nation, she didn’t know how to “speak” music in Hebrew. She hadn’t seriously learned to play and read music in Israel and told me that she has included a piece of Bach sheet music in one of her pills for exactly that reason!

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## Discovering the Versatility of Glass

While Katya was deciding to leave the UK and move back to Israel, she was offered a job in Murano, Italy, at the eminent Berengo Studio. There she began consistently using her navel to create art. For Katya, the navel represents a connection to mother and is a symbol of contemplative transition. Katya Filmus arrived in the glass motherland of Murano with just two suitcases and a cello. All the things she had accumulated in her life had been whittled down to that. She began to systematically make molds of her belongings and cast them into glass with her navel included in each of those casts—a cathartic ritual symbolically composing a requiem to her forsaken life in the UK.

As I sat with Katya enjoying and savoring the tales of her personal journey, I asked her what her favorite thing in glass is at the moment. “In my practice I am most enjoying opaque black glass. As a material, glass never ceases to amaze me. I used to use transparent glass to get my ideas across. It was immense work to grind and polish my pieces to perfection, but the black glass fits me and my ideas. My work is about the body, and black glass shows every tiny crease and texture of the skin. After a small amount of finishing and a slight sandblast, it comes out completely perfect. I love it.



*Katya Izabel Filmus, Omphaloskepsis Handbag, kiln cast glass, 19 cm x 20 cm x 8 cm, 2020. Photo by Yona Shlay.*



*Katya Izabel Filmus, Omphaloskepsis Ash, kiln cast glass lead crystal, 32 cm x 18 cm x 10 cm, 2020. Photo by Yona Shlay.*



*Katya Izabel Filmus, 1984, kiln cast glass lead crystal, 29 cm x 29 cm x 16 cm, 2008. Photo by Chris Blade.*

“People come into my studio, and I ask them what they think my pieces are made from? They say anything except glass such as bronze, polymer, or clay until they touch it. That’s what fascinates me so much. Glass is such a versatile material, and I discover something new every time. That’s what I love about glass. You learn all the time. There is no end. There is no limit to the amount of knowledge you need to make glass. I work in fine art, though, and when glass doesn’t serve me I will turn to other materials, and I don’t feel like a traitor or anything like that.

“I think that the material should serve the purpose. Currently I am using cement, plaster, latex, and bronze as well as glass in my practice, although glass is the chief material. It is part of my DNA. Sometimes it is very liberating to use another medium, because every other material is so much easier to work with.”



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## Success through Passion, Determination, and Innovation

When the subject of success came up, Katya described what she feels that an artist needs to succeed. "What you need to prosper is firstly determination, a belief that no matter what others say, that's what you will do. You must have immense passion, and you must be willing to make tough sacrifices. If someone can live without making art then they should, because it's such a difficult profession and takes so long to get recognized. Months can turn into years when developing a body of work in your own language. You obviously have to be talented, but talent is open to interpretation. Someone said that genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration, and I believe that.

"Secondly, you must have something interesting to say—something new. You must stand out. There are plenty of gifted people out there. You have to develop your own personal interest from within your practice, and that voice has to be different and authentic."

In terms of subject matter, Katya Izabel Filmus realizes that hers does not appeal to the masses. "It is more for art connoisseurs. My audience includes glass collectors, museums, galleries, women's organizations, and public spaces such as hospitals and airports. I am patronized less by private collections and more by public ones.

Toward the end of our time together, Katya shared what she would have told her younger self. "Everything I wanted and dreamed of is going to happen, but it is going to take a long time and I have to be patient!" As we closed our meeting, it occurred to me that Katya's entire body of work is a bid for immortality in more ways than one. Keep an eye out for her traveling solo show, which will open in 2022.

G/A



Katya Izabel Filmus, Body Mapping, Israel, kiln cast glass, 41 cm x 36 cm x 5 cm. Photo by Yona Shlay.



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Dr. Julie Anne Denton received her doctorate in the combination of sandcast and flameworked glass for artists from the National Glass Centre, UK. She has learned from and worked with the best flameworking artists in the world including Emilio Santini, Lucio Bubacco, Vittorio Costantini, Gianni Toso, Shane Fero, Loren Stump, and Sally Prasch, to name just a few. She rounded off her education with Bertil Vallien of the renowned Swedish design house Kosta Boda (est. 1742).

Julie settled in Zürich, Switzerland, in 2010. From the center of the city she runs her design firm, [www.Atelier315.ch](http://www.Atelier315.ch), and [www.ZurichGlassSchool.com](http://www.ZurichGlassSchool.com), her online learning platform for sculptural flameworking skills. She works with a small team beside her who all care deeply about quality education, creativity, and business.

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

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