Oculus Dexterous  In her newest glassworks, Vladimira Klumpar generates complex sculptural and optical puzzles that become the eye’s delight to resolve. The challenges for the artist lie in the design and execution of these tactile and visual surprises. Her art comes to fruition in Železný Brod, a Bohemian town that because of its school, studios and foundries, has for many decades advanced the technical capabilities for monumental glass work. Her kiln-casting allows a great deal of control regarding pigmentation and massing, but because of Klumpar’s large and complex forms, the process becomes, as she puts it, an “adventure” in which there is no guarantee of technical success.

Klumpar emphasizes the experiential nature of each of her works; volume and surface differences become visible through distinct planar shifts that invite continued looking and comparison. Klumpar’s glass embodies the lessons passed to her professor, Stanislav Libenský, by his teacher, Josef Kaplický who wrote, “Abstraction in art is like an egg. The geometric shape on the outside is enlivened by the warm and mysterious life inside of it.” Her pieces command physical interactions with viewers; as they move around the sculptures, certain characteristics come into view while others disappear; interiors seem as exteriors; surfaces become volumes. Memory and movement are required for appreciation of them.

Color is an important aspect of this discovery, especially as saturation is surprisingly variable and occurs in unexpected passages. Klumpar controls the strength of the pigmentation through varying the thickness of the glass or by creating reflections that can multiply the intensity of the color. It’s astonishing that in the same piece, thick areas can appear pale while narrow appendages take on deep hues. Klumpar has employed rich coloration throughout her career—though she does not employ intense cobalt and copper pigments as she has in the past, her new monochromatic endeavors in subdued blues, greens and yellows from nature allow more contrasted phenomena and highly variable color dispersion.

Because so much glasswork involves the refraction of light, it’s all too easy to forget its haptic qualities. For Klumpar, touch seems to be a part of the experiential game, especially as the optics can be so deceptive. For instance, in Rhythm and Reflection (2010), the complex lenses evoke a doubt about what is real and illusory to the point of needing, like the Apostle Thomas, to touch the solids and voids for confirmation of what one doubts, or thinks one knows. One doesn’t really look at this sculpture, as much as through it. The cold-worked crystal surfaces, some etched, some polished, create an interplay of actual and virtual that sometimes affirm, and other times invert the sense of mass and void; images of the reliefs displaced into the smoothest, polished masses often appear to be more physically present than the sculptural cast surfaces themselves.
Moreover, the rational hexagons can read as a flat pattern of lozenges or as a volumetric, geometric landscape. The honeycomb shapes also orient the viewer allowing comprehension of how these sculptural voids and masses become ghosted throughout, depending on the direction of light and the viewer’s perspective.

For all the precision in the geometric casting, cutting and cold-work, Klumpar engages accidental forms chanced upon during the execution. Some rough surfaces contrast those made uniform by polishing and etching; subtle seams leave evidence of the casting process. Trapped gases leave traces in the glass that give the pieces an additional inner life. Though the bubbles are tiny voids, they appear as solid presences and can even lend atmospheric qualities to the thick glass. They also offer a paradoxical weightlessness or buoyancy within this heavy material.

While absolutely perfect casting is possible, these intentional imperfections incite awareness of the light play, reflections, refractions, obfuscations and other calculated mediations.

Though they may seem like formalist studies, Klumpar’s gridded geometries also hold important symbolic weight. The hexagonal and “bubble” patterns are cast from contemporary building materials—they are latent reminders of the building boom (and bust) experienced by the European Union over the last fifteen years. Such optics and architectonics still carry political and economic associations, decades after the likes of Vladimir Tatlin, Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner gave a visual order to revolutionary ideals through similar shapes and the building materials of their time. Such latent partisan connotations were sympathetic for the exploration of abstraction in the “decorative arts” under Czechoslovak communism. Libenský, Jaroslava Brychtová and František Vízner, among Klumpar’s other teachers and predecessors, were thus allowed to explore enigmatic abstract expressions conversant with late Modernism.

Many of Klumpar’s undertakings have an interplay of hard-edged geometries or biomorphs that suggest the masculine and feminine duality. Coupled works such as the aqua Triangle in Square (2008) and Oval in Square (2008) strongly suggest a conversation between animus and anima. The viewer participates in this comparison, finding difference in sameness and vice-versa. Both pieces are set against a Cartesian grid of small bulges—it is the deviations from the framework, the differences in chromatic saturation, physical presence and optics, that evoke different attitudes and genders.

Kind of Balance (2010) towers as an ochre architectonic presence, its prismatic proportions evoking a skyscraper—a significance fitting the construction-material sources for the regular geometric patterns in this and other recent works. At nearly six feet it stands as a personage, and
again there is the paradox that something so weighty and palpable is equivocal—the sum of quicksilver phenomena, developable surfaces, and participatory observation. Each cellular bulge becomes a lens that incorporates the gallery (or whatever ambient space beyond) into multiple microcosms—the monolith invites intimate looking. Architecture has long been an important reference for Klumpar. Her sculptures from the 1980s, for instance, with their illusionary inclusions inserted in layers of optical glass, evoked Mayan pyramids (she lives in Mexico part of each year) and Art Deco buildings. But Kind of Balance and other recent works are also new versions of Klumpar's previous natural forms. Its columnar shape, for instance, is a more optically complex version of an earlier acid-etched, bottle-green stele titled Open Geometry (2007) that suggests a rigid grass stalk.

A smoky spheroid piece, Ryder (2010), from her new series incorporates the same textured "skin" of raised dots, but here Klumpar shows another direction, as the grid escapes the slab and yields to a dark pod taken from her organic repertoire of the last two decades. In Ryder's intertwining planes, viewers are rewarded all the more as surface patterns become poetically hyperbolized in their curved reflections and transmissions despite the work's intimate scale. Klumpar proceeds with this new vocabulary and technical confidence to write a narrative, not of legible symbols, but of evolving visual revelations, occlusions and comparisons—a satisfying dialogue of mystical optics and mass.

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