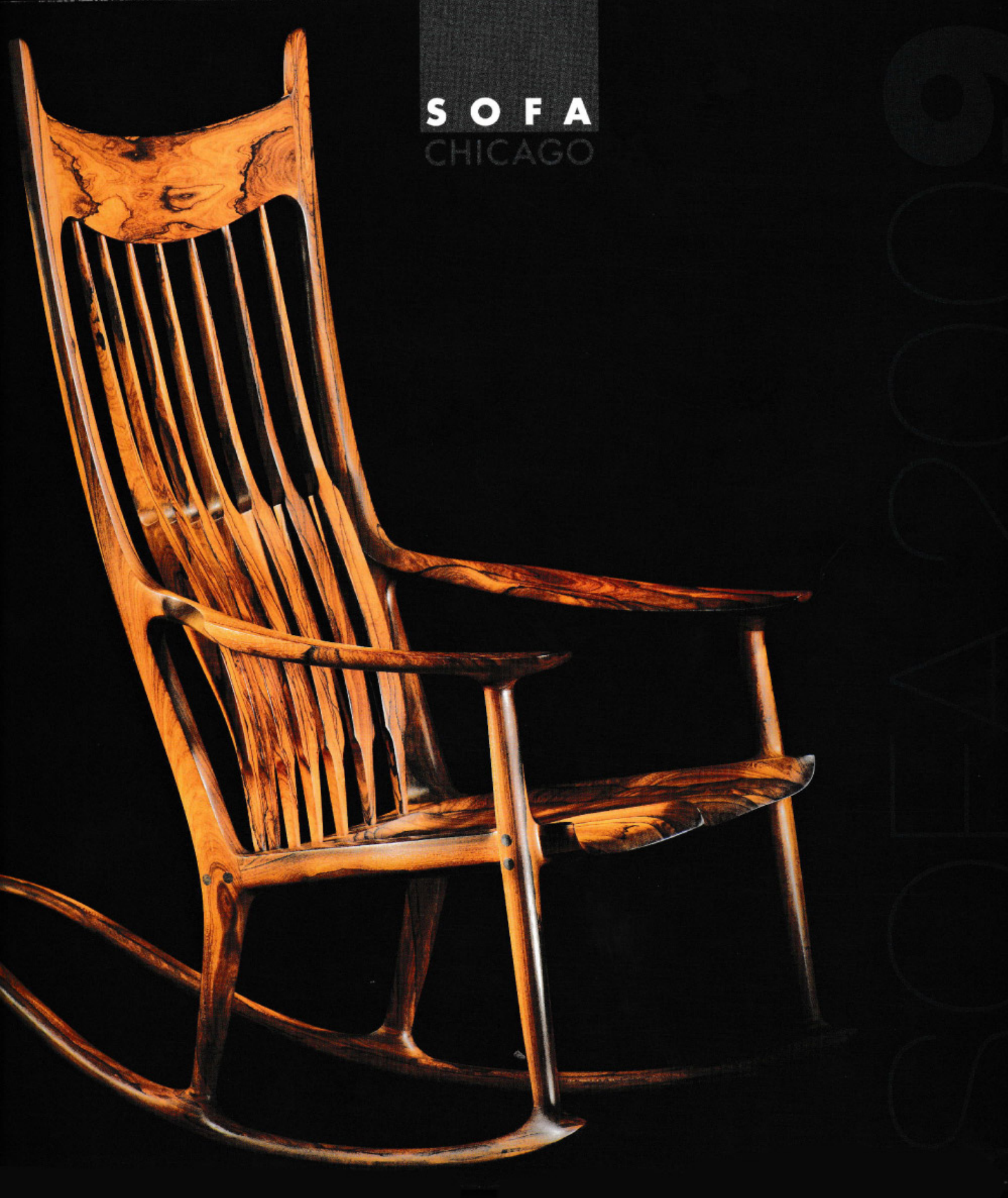


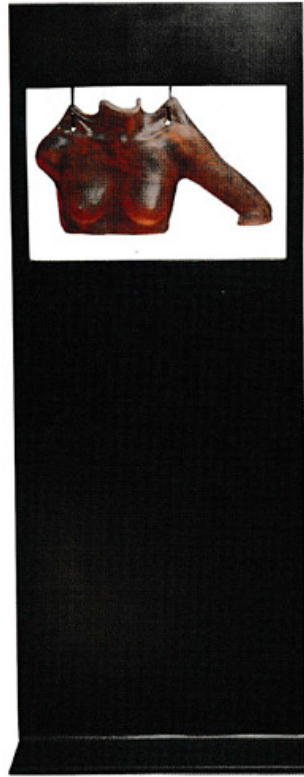
S O F A  
CHICAGO



No Pretense: The Evocative Glass  
Sculpture of Lucy Lyon

*By Leanne Goebel*





A.  
Lucy Lyon  
4 A.M., 2002  
glass  
16.25 x 24.5 x 17.75  
photo: Addison Doty



B.  
Front Window and  
Rear Window, 2003  
glass  
31 x 15 x 8  
photo: Addison Doty

B.

A woman wearing a nightgown sits on the edge of a bed, her shoulders lifted in tension, one hand clasped to each knee, bare feet pressed to the floor. Her back is to a man lying on his side, his back to her, resting his head on one hand, his slippers neatly on the floor beneath the bed. Is he her husband? Her lover? A one-night-stand? What is he looking at so casually? How can he be so at peace while she is so ill at ease?

The answers are not readily apparent upon the first, or even the fourteenth glance at *4 A.M.*, a Lucy Lyon sculpture made of glass and steel. Lyon's work deals not with overt gesture but rather subtle body movements—the slump of a shoulder, the tilt of a head—which convey emotional narratives about ordinary moments. If the goal of an artist is to close the gap between art and life, then Lyon chooses to do so without drama, without shock value. Using a challenging medium, Lyon conveys with an asceticism reminiscent of Edward Hopper, the loneliness of urban life. For more than thirty years, her work has evolved from stained glass

artist, to two-dimensional dioramas, to cast glass, to a sculptor whose chosen medium happens to be glass—one of the most difficult materials an artist can use to create human figures.

Lyon sculpts using the lost wax casting method. A figure is sculpted in wax. A plaster mold called an investment mold is formed around the completed wax sculpture. The wax is steamed out and the mold is placed in the kiln. A flowerpot holding glass is positioned over the mold so when the kiln reaches peak temperature the glass will flow through the hole in the flowerpot into the mold. The kiln heats slowly, allowing moisture to escape and the glass to reach viscosity. The annealing process takes days as the glass must be held at its annealing temperature and then cooled very slowly and steadily to prevent it from cracking or breaking easily when cured. One figure can remain in the kiln for ten days to six weeks.

Lyon is a keen observer of humans and their interactions. She wants to convey to the viewer an experience and she would like it to be beautiful—

an overused yet often undefined term that itself evokes reaction in art today. "I'm a sucker for a beautiful face. It's not a classic beauty. I have tended to want a spare look where the bones are evident and character is obvious in the stance and facial structure," Lyon says.

Hence, the problem with defining beauty; it is subjective. It's not the golden ratio or some classically informed definition that inspires Lyon, and it's not just the proportions of a face, but a stance, or slightly bent knee that tweaks the artist's interest because it is a form of figurative communication.

Lyon's own story is as evocative as the narratives conveyed in her vignettes and sculptural oeuvre: single figures on slabs of glass like *Precipice*; two figures separated by a wall of glass in *Potential Encounter*; a figure and a column, or two figures and a pillar as in *Tete a Tete*; queues of figures lined up and waiting in *Queue 4*; a gathering of two figures and one outside the group alone, an empty stool between them in *After Eight*; half-life-sized body parts of glass displayed in

windows of metal in *Rear Window*; glass heads like disembodied dinner party guests on slabs of glass or metal; or, what she is most well-known for, figures in libraries.

Her development as an artist did not come from traditional avenues. She did not go to art school, or apprentice with a single master glass artist. She isn't rooted in art theory and lineal art history. Lyon has trained with multiple artists and masters. She began her art career at the age of thirty as a working mother who wanted a flexible career while raising her child. Her artistic growth comes from her own intelligence and effort, along with a dedication to push the medium of glass as far



C.

as she can take it. Her naiveté provided a freedom to explore, because she often didn't know that she wasn't supposed to be able to do something with glass—she just figured out how.

Her dealer, Tom Riley of Thomas R. Riley Galleries in Cleveland, Ohio says: "Lucy is not content just to be decorative. She wants to say something. She's taken the time and has the ability to do that. Every step requires courage. There's a lot of problem solving. There are logistical and technical problems to execute to get the work done. She's conquered them all and we will launch her new breakthrough series at SOFA."

Half-life-sized figures are the breakthrough series to which Riley is referring. The first, an amber yellow young female sitting with her legs crossed, arms resting at her sides, her head tilted slightly upward, the curve in her toe, the angle of her foot suggesting she is bouncing or perhaps swinging a leg. Another sculpture features two of the same figure, one cast in nearly clear white glass, the other a dark brown almost black. One knee is bent, an elbow wrapped around the knee, her head outstretched. The two appear to be leaning in and listening to each other.

Lyon has always been courageous. She was born in 1947 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Her father was a real estate appraiser and her mother a nurse and teacher, who met during WWII. Books always surrounded Lucy and she recalls spending time looking through her mother's art books as a child, enjoying Thomas Hart Benton's nearly sculptural paintings of figures in everyday scenes. But what she recalls most vividly were visits to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and viewing the crucifixes. The FAC has one of the finest collections of Santos in the country, collected by museum founder and benefactor Alice Bemis Taylor.

Lyon, who was raised as a Unitarian because her father was Jewish and her mother Baptist, grew up as a thinking person. She studied Oriental Philosophy at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio from 1965-1971 and spent time in the middle of her college days living in Greece and wandering around Europe. She met her husband in New York City where she worked in the Parks and Recreation department as an urban planner during the 1970s. It was here she says she got her art education by visiting museums and galleries. She lived next door to two working artists. It was the first time Lyon realized that making art could be a career. In 1977 she took her first stained glass class at the Riverside Church in New York taught by Ellen Simon.

However, not long after taking her first class, Lucy and her husband, Vincent Yuan, a nuclear physicist, moved to Los Alamos, New Mexico. Lyon studied with glass artist Narcissus Quagliata and apprenticed with artist Larry Fielder. In 1978 her daughter Jada Yuan was born. In 1980, missing New York City, and trying to adjust to life in Los Alamos, Lyon rented a space on Main Street above a department store, and began making stained glass. This location allowed her to be around people, something she needed. Her earliest work featured portraits of people in bars and New York City street life. Then came the images of low rider cars from nearby Espanola, which evolved into scenes of Americana and vignettes of Sparky's Diner, a place literally caught in a time warp, frozen, much like Los Alamos, in the 1950s. Soon she began exploring slumping glass and ways to make her figures three-dimensional. She created thick, flat people that folded and bent like pop-up figures.

One of Lyon's artistic influences is Edward Hopper, who had a retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1980; his painting *Early Sunday Morning* was on the cover of every New York City phone book around this same time. Lyon appropriated *Early Sunday Morning* and created a stained glass work of the painting, which she called *City Morning*—only she included figures. "I'm not attracted to Hopper's work devoid of

glass  
20 x 30

D.  
Precipice, 2006  
glass  
24.5 x 7 x 8  
photo: Addison Doty

glass  
57 x 27 x 15  
photo: Addison Doty

F.  
Queue 4, 2009  
glass  
22 x 40.5 x 11.75  
photo: Addison Doty



D.

people," Lyon says. "I love his New York work. The single figures in public places. I like the idea that you can be alone surrounded by people." Aloneness, loneliness and solitude are deeply resonant themes for Lyon.

Recently, while flipping through a book on Hopper she found his painting *Excursions into Philosophy*, that features a woman lying on her side and a man sitting on the edge of a bed. She had never seen the painting before and was struck by its affinity to her own sculpture *4 A.M.*

In the early 1990s, Lyon created her first library tableaux with flat figures surrounded by shelves of books. A library is another place people go to be alone with their thoughts, while surrounded by others. There is little talking and human interaction. In Lyon's earliest libraries, the books were opaque; later they became translucent and colorful, and she began making the shelves out of metal instead of glass. The Los Alamos library was a sanctuary for her and this series continues to be popular with collectors, having evolved from pop-up figures to early cast glass, to more refined glass sculpted figures sitting, standing, and one even watching television in a library. Critics of her early works consider the glass libraries cute and cliché, but not challenging enough to the viewer. Her early cast figures were deemed awkward, rudimentary, and her skills as a sculptor proximate, her figures more like caricatures, yet her straightforward and fresh approach continues to be commended. The libraries have continued to evolve.

"I like the idea of solitude," Lyon says from her studio in Jaconita, New Mexico about 20 minutes north of Santa Fe, near the Pueblo of Pojoaque. "But these [earlier works] are more about being lonely. Now I'm more content being by myself and my single figures are more contented and less rejected."

They are also more refined, her sculpting skills improving over the years from spontaneous figures, to ones that capture the more detailed nuances of aloneness. A life sculpting group meets weekly in her studio, a territorial style adobe house that sits on land below the traditional adobe house she shares with her husband. The 1,000 square foot building has high-pitched ceilings and two separate workspaces. In one she keeps her kilns and the polishing station. In the other is a sculpting space featuring another half-life-sized figure leaning back on one arm. Outside, under a covered overhang on a concrete slab patio is a wax station and mold-making space.

Lyon is a woman who portrays a quiet happiness, a contentedness with life and her art. Her hair is shoulder-length, straight and the color of sand, she is slight of figure and looks younger than her 62 years, dressed in a black tank top and black Capri pants. She is vivacious and genuine. "With Lucy there's no bluff, no pretense, no mirrors, no hype, no trickery," Tom Riley says of the artist he has worked with for close to 15 years.

Inspired by the book *New Glass* by Otto Rigan, the self-taught glass artist enrolled in a master's course at Pilchuck Glass School in Washington in 1988 where she studied with Paul Marioni, Bertil Vallien and Clifford Rainey. "I didn't know then that they were supposed to be my heroes," Lyon's confesses. She learned from some of the best.

In 1993 she cast her first figure in glass. Later, a workshop with Linda Benglis at the Santa Fe Art Institute would advance her sculpting skills and inspire Lyon to create life-sized heads in glass, and to elaborate on head gestures, which she placed on formed steel or copper wire wrapped bases. She returned to Pilchuck again in 2000 to study with Ann Robinson, an artist from New Zealand. "I was already doing 18 inch figures but her workshop totally changed the way I cast my work. I continue to use her method even for the half-life figures," Lyon says. In 2001 she cast her first half-life sized figure, *Helen*.

Another progression has been to move away from the glassiness of glass. She no longer tries to make the figures shiny, emphasizing the materiality of the work. She embraces the opacity of unpolished glass and has added more texture to the figure's clothing. Her colors have also shifted

away from the Jolly Rancher candy colors seen in earlier works to more translucent amber tones. "I like the warm feeling of yellows, pinks and reds. My people are warm," Lyon says.

Yet her work is not about materiality for the sake of material. In 1985, Lyon told *American Glass Quarterly*: "I am not firmly convinced that technique in itself is a prerequisite for making art in glass." Art is not about a technique, nor is it simply about an idea. Art is about relationships. Lyon has mastered technique and presents compelling narratives about the human condition—the interaction and/or lack thereof among humans pressed together in urban settings, poignantly explored through the simple communication of evocative body movements. And yes, it is often beautiful, but perhaps not in a classical way. It is often sad. It is often lonely. But it resonates with a familiarity to which any viewer can relate.

Leanne Goebel is a member of the International Association of Art Critics. She is a 2009 NEA International Arts Journalism Institute Fellow and a 2007 recipient of the Andy Warhol | Creative Capital Arts Writers Grant.

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F.