

Shari Mendelson: Glasslike

Curated by Elizabeth Essner

September 12 - November 3, 2018

“It is a dangerous myth that we are better historians than our predecessors.”¹
Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*

History often has as much to do with the present as it does the past. There are two thousand years between the work of Shari Mendelson and the ancient art to which it responds: primarily glass, primarily from ancient Rome and early Islam. It is easy to dismiss the ancient world as long ago and far away. It was. But, to see its objects—the same materials (glass, terracotta), the same forms (vessels, figures), and, in fact, many of the same methods of making (glassblowing, pot throwing) as today—is to remind ourselves that then and now, they and us, are not as far apart as we might imagine.

Memory, both individual and collective, offers a through-line between the past and the present. It was already well-trodden territory by 350 BC when Aristotle wrote his treatise *On Memory and Recollection*.² As he saw it, memory was located within the sensorial regions of the soul, understood as both of the mind and body. In the briefest terms, he wrote of two modes: recollection, an active kind of reasoned recall and response to the past, and memory, a more passive absorption of previous events, objects, and reactions. The philosopher also noted that this full-bodied sense of the past was prone to lapses. And it is in both memory and its lapses that Mendelson's work resides.

The artist translates the artifacts of the ancient world with the all-too-abundant material of our own era: throwaway plastic bottles. Her focus is not particular to taxonomy, or even archeology. Instead, the artist wedges open the cracks of memory. Her glasslike vessels, animals, and mythical figures are filled with fantasies, wanderings, inaccuracies—in short, lapses. Mendelson's work gets the past wrong, but in doing so, it reveals the present.

Glasslike presents Shari Mendelson's work in context with a key source, ancient glass. In a body of work begun a decade ago, the artist expresses the essence of glass by way of bottles of POM Wonderful, V8, and Sierra Mist. Archeological in feel, her work is as mysterious as it is mesmerizing. “Sell-by” dates and impressed logos reveal their contemporary origins. *Glasslike* takes a second meaning as well: the artist's deep fascination with and careful study of the objects of antiquity. Not a glassblower herself,

¹ Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: Liveright, 2016), p. 16.

² Aristotle, *On Memory and Reminiscence* (350 B.C.E), Translation by J. I. Beare, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/memory.html>, accessed 7/7/18.

Mendelson is instead an observer who translates material and memory into the present tense.

The exhibition begins with a group of three ancient glass vessels that date from late Rome and early Islam. Glassblowing was discovered in ancient Rome just around 50 BC, but the earliest examples of core-formed glass vessels trace back to more than 1,500 years before. In Rome, glassblowing became something of an ancient industry, which transformed the material from a precious luxury to one more easily attained, used as containers for items including oils, cosmetics, and food.

The intimate scale of these ancient works is stark in contrast to Mendelson's sometimes floor-scale renditions, but the correlations are obvious. They share forms, especially the long-necked, round-bodied early Islamic *Persian Cut Bottle* (9th-10th Century). They also share surfaces. The telltale ancient iridescence of the late Roman *Flask* (3rd-4th Century) is recreated with applied glitter or powdered mica (used for eye make-up's shimmer) or both, as in *Pig with Classical Vessel* (2018).

Mendelson's work maintains the same feel as these ancient pieces, but her means to get there is quite different. She begins by cutting pieces from the bottles she has found around her Williamsburg, Brooklyn neighborhood. Castoff metal bits sometimes find their way into the work as well. Hot glue holds her pieces together and Magic Sculpt, an epoxy clay, fills in the seams. The surfaces are embellished with an unlikely set of mediums. For instance, *After William* (2012)—decorated with tea bags, acrylic polymer, and paint—is the artist's take on the unofficial mascot of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *William*, an Egyptian faience hippopotamus.³

The straight-laced titles of Mendelson's work echo the descriptive style common to the study of antiquity. They also belie a certain wit. *Shiny Round Blue Green Vessel with Long Neck* (2018) is just that, as is *Green Animal with Vessel* (2017) although the title doesn't convey the chuckle inherent to the piece: a small dog-like creature carries an impossibly outsize vessel on its back.

The simple titles also point us to Mendelson's ancient sources, like a personal tour guide. For instance, a series of oversize vessels among them, *Four Vessels with Exoskeleton (blue)* (2017), pay homage to cosmetic flasks made in Rome or Syria from roughly the 4th to 6th centuries, each an elaborate little glass wonder.⁴ Through Mendelson's lens, the forms have scaled-up in ornament and size, now grown into vessels three and half feet high.

The artist has occasionally extended her reach into glass objects. This began

³ *Hippopotamus ("William")*, ca. 1961–1878 B.C., Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accession no. 17.9.1.

⁴ Many key examples of this form can be found in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>) including *Glass cosmetic flask with four compartments (kohl tube)*, accession no. X.21.153 and *Glass multiple cosmetic flask (kohl tube)*, accession no X.21.209.

with a 2014 residency here at UrbanGlass, and later, residencies at the Corning Museum of Glass and Toledo Museum of Art. In each locale, Mendelson partnered with glassblowers to translate both ancient vessels and her plastic works into new glass pieces. *Animal with Green Head and Cage Cup* (2015) retells the strange and wonderful animal flasks of the 5th to 8th centuries; the originals likely used as containers for perfume or kohl.⁵ For her own work, the mold-blown glass versions can be likened to a child's game of telephone: glass interpreted into plastic and then back into glass. Each piece, early to modern, is linked, but has a distinct identity of its own.

Without becoming revivalism or simple imitation, Mendelson's work joins a long history of artists using ancient objects as inspiration. She points our gaze backwards to highlight what's right in front of us. As our eyes adjust to her forms, the previous lives of her materials emerge: the bottoms of bottles are reborn as faceted ornament, a milk jug becomes an animal, the visage of a figure appears, formed from the tiniest bits of plastic.

This year several residencies gave the artist the gift of time to work. Then a Guggenheim Foundation grant allowed Mendelson the research trip of a lifetime. She took in the museums of London and Rome, the sites of Pompeii, and Herculaneum, absorbing the vastness of its art and the even vaster history it documents. Her most recent works, made in 2018, have shifted in kind. Leaning towards the figural, the pieces have become more granular in detail, and more narrative in scope. The artist has been especially taken with Cypriot fertility figures and mythical creatures of ancient Greece, both made in terracotta. As Mendelson transforms the clay bodies into glasslike plastic, she continues to build the polyglot memory she began a decade ago.

It is hard not to think about the past in this tumultuous present moment. How, exactly, did we get here? "When I started this work about 10 years ago, I was thinking about how cultures and civilizations rise and fall, and how the objects that remain illustrate those times," Mendelson explains. Over the two millennia between the glass of the ancients and the plastic of today, the arc of time has been filled with countless histories of creation and destruction, and the heartbreaking beauty of the objects left behind. It is a keen reminder that we are no better than those before us, but perhaps no worse either. We are then, as Mendelson puts it, merely "part of the cycle of change."

Elizabeth Essner, Curator

⁵ See examples including *Animal Shaped Flask*, 5th–6th century, collection of Toledo Museum of Art, accession no. 1923.2045 and *Flask*, late 7th–8th century, collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 69.153.

About the artist:

Shari Mendelson (b. 1961) is an artist based in Brooklyn and upstate NY. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally including solo exhibitions at Todd Merrill Studio in Manhattan, Pierogi Gallery in Brooklyn, and John Davis Gallery in Hudson, New York. Among other recognitions, the artist has received four New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowships, and is a 2017 Guggenheim Fellowship recipient. Mendelson received her MFA from SUNY New Paltz in 1986 and is currently a lecturer at Parsons School of Design in Manhattan.

About the curator:

Elizabeth Essner is an independent curator, writer, and researcher based in Brooklyn, New York. Recently a Curatorial Fellow with the Center for Craft, she has curated exhibitions for institutions including the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum and Arizona State University Art Museum. Elizabeth has written for magazines including *Modern* and *Metalsmith* and serves as a researcher for two forthcoming craft-focused publications. She has previously been an auction house specialist and an appraiser. She received her MA from the Bard Graduate Center in Manhattan.

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About UrbanGlass:

Established in New York City in 1977, UrbanGlass fosters experimentation and advances the use and critical understanding of glass as a creative medium. Exhibitions are supported by Agnes Gund, Capital Group Companies Global, the Lily Auchincloss Foundation, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Seth Sprague Educational and Charitable Foundation.

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