

**Quabbin Art Association
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Nancy Nicholson

Stained Glass Artist

917-696-7882

email nancy@nodisc.com

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Written by Colleen Bryan

“The Artist in Transformation” - Nancy Nicholson

Art flows through the bodies of artists in ways that are often unacknowledged until the energy transfer is short-circuited by an injury. Even then, the artistic impulse remains, demanding to push through to expression. Not all artists are as conscious in rerouting and tending to this energy flow as Nancy Nicholson, a stained glass artist who lives in Brooklyn, New York. Her attention to the interplay between her body and her art has allowed Nicholson to reclaim her artistry from the sticky fingers of an injury, and to bring the subject of transition and change front and center as the thematic focus of her current artwork.

In contrast to our youth-centric culture, which tries to deny or disguise the effects of aging, Nicholson bravely explores its existential questions to fuel her work. A series of figurative nudes and focused studies of her own body provides her a context for examining the territory: “What does it mean to age, to feel change in my body; To be unable to do what I have always done? Most importantly, what beauty and dignity remain amidst the obvious erosion of youth, and how do those qualities transform physically over time?”

“I am working on a progression of drawings and glass renderings of figures that will observe my body changing over decades. An honest exploration of the quirky ways we hold ourselves, of the figure suspended in space.”

Early Art: Profusion and Limits

Nicholson’s art has long incorporated a host of expressions, from drawing to modern dance, to designing for a Cambridge, Massachusetts’s glass studio. *“Boston has an amazing dance community and I danced there through art school, into my late 30’s, alongside my stained glass work, performing in local choreography showcases. But eventually, the dancing became more challenging physically. I hit a wall where I felt the level of effort required to keep dancing was unsustainable. At about that time, a career change took my husband and me to*

New York City. There, I shifted my emphasis to my visual art path, and opened my own glass studio.”

With New York City providing a backdrop of inspiration, Nicholson began designing a series of cityscapes, which occupied her next eight years. Nicholson exhibited and sold her work at juried shows, most notably the Philadelphia Museum of Art and The Smithsonian craft shows. She developed a reputation for her dynamic renderings of the city in leaded stained glass. Toward the end of that period, though, the imagery and techniques she had mastered felt less compelling and cued her need for change.

Before she could act on those cues, Nicholson’s body faltered. Routine knee surgery cascaded into back issues that left her unable to walk, much less work in the glass studio, for several months. Nearing middle age, she worried whether this new narrower space would circumscribe her life and art going forward.

In depression, she turned again to drawing, her simplest, most direct route to art since childhood. *“All my life, drawing was easy for me, but I didn’t really value it as my ‘art’. As I was healing, I found that drawing became a meditation, gave me peace of mind and helped move me forward.”* She began translating time-delayed photographs of her nude body into life-sized drawings that documented gesture, muscle, girth, and skin tone.

Eventually, Nicholson regained full physical function and was able to return to the glass studio, but there she found her psychic landscape altered. The cityscapes felt increasingly remote and impersonal. The drawings that had always seemed incidental took on more gravitas. The meditation on her body and its aging process, instigated by her disability, retained its urgency.

Now she is pushing beyond the drawn figures to carve them in her beloved glass in a way that is emotional, evocative and powerful. This series of glass images requires experimentation with different techniques and materials, as well as the thematic and conceptual exploration of space.

Brave Steps into New Territory

Nicholson is self-conscious about shining light on her artwork in this transitional moment. She has an understandable wariness about introducing nudes to a sometimes-priggish public, and feels a personal vulnerability in exposing her body to strangers. She worries that she may not yet be far enough through the transition to show a progression, and is unsure whether her new glass studies have attained the mastery evident in her earlier work. But artistic growth occurs in the uncomfortable, fearful, treacherous moment, when the artist reaches beyond her grasp and entertains the dual possibility of failure or transformation.

Nicholson observes that she is not interested in reclining, relaxed, comfortable figures. *“I am trying to reach for shapes that capture movement, figures that bend and in ways that might not seem comfortable. I want the images to show energy in the gesture as hair flies and the arms, torso and legs flail and twist and move*

about in space. Reaching, grabbing, falling, searching; the images are metaphors for life.”

Nicholson seeks to exploit the fragility and transparency of glass to enhance the emotional and elusive qualities of gesture and emotion.

“I’ve been in this artistic transition for five years now. While the impetus for that transition was a physical disability that brought my glass production to a dead stop, the need to change directions was already building. Now, with the figure drawings informing my glasswork, I am working in a way that is far more personal and important to me.”

Transitional Pieces

Technical limitations must be addressed with the new artwork. While the artist and her drawings are five feet tall, the size of Nicholson’s kiln restricts her glass images to 17-by-22 inches. *“Currently, I’m using a single sheet of flash glass and hand carving, sandblasting, painting, and staining on that sheet. The next step will be to use more traditional stained glass techniques to assemble multiple pieces into larger works, joined by the more traditional lead lines.*

“One of the reasons my cityscapes are successful is that I’ve developed a good sense of how to interpret an image for stained glass, so that the lead lines don’t dominate; I am able to float the more delicate lines and shapes into space by using glass paint and sandblasting, resulting in a less bulky and more painterly feel. I now have to address this challenge with the even more delicate human form, without losing the poetry that exists in the drawings.”

Nicholson looks to her earlier explorations of trees and birds for clues. Specifically, she points to a tri-colored triptych, entitled *Waiting for Spring*, as the transitional piece between her cityscapes and human figures. *“When I look at the triptych now, I see a departure from my previous literal images of the city. The colors in the triptych suggest a more emotional journey. The lead lines disappear, allowing the colors to sing. The abstraction celebrates the glass and the refracted light, evoking emotion more fully than I had ever done before. I can see that I was trying, even then, in 2013, to move in the direction of my current work, treating the images more abstractly and using the material to convey more emotion.”*

Experimentation

Nicholson has had to acquire new techniques in her current work. Using a Dremel tool on glass feels very similar to drawing in that you put your hand down to make your mark, but with drawing one can erase mistakes. *“When carving flashed glass, there is a moment when you hold your breath. One false move, and the line/shape is gone for good... It is wonderfully satisfying to master these*

new skills. With the cityscapes, I mastered the techniques I needed to make the city look real and alive. Now I'm trying to do that with the figure."

In interpreting human figures on glass, Nicholson says, *"I really want to make these glass pieces be their own thing, not just a drawing painted onto glass. The human figure has been rendered in stained glass for many years, but I want to do it in a way that is new and fresh. I'm trying not to just replicate the glass painting that has been done traditionally, but to step into something new."*

In the transition from photograph to drawing, Nicholson obliterates any reference to the ground, leaving the figures floating in space. *"I like messing with the idea of where ground is, or that there is no ground. The challenge of transitioning a life size image from drawing to glass is that I must break up the space, while preserving the floating poetry of the drawing."*

Nicholson has sketched studies from the drawings onto Lambert's Transparent White Opal glass. *"I really like the result, though they need to be installed in a space where the viewer can interact with the environment beyond the glass."* As in her drawings, the mass of black hair is a strong focus accenting mood and motion in this series.

Nicholson experiments with putting each drawing through a progression in such pieces as *No Evil*. For another set she uses multiple images, dancing opposite each other, all focused on a single gesture. (*Learning to Breathe, Reflection, Afloat*)

Freeing Energy to Move Forward

Nicholson has recently changed her personal lifestyle and routines in tandem with her new explorations of the figure by moving her glass studio from New York City to a family home in the country.

Unexpectedly, the move has shifted the daily rhythm of Nicholson's studio work as well. *"I used to need to fit my creativity into hours between 9-6 so I could leave the city studio while streets were relatively safe, or to run daily errands, cook dinner etc. Now I find that I can immerse myself more into the process uninterrupted. Hours go by, where I have not looked at a clock, because I don't need to go anywhere."*

"As a younger artist I felt the need to keep producing and cranking things out. Now I can step away from that, take my time and reflect." Nicholson has chosen to focus her reflection on the aging process, documenting and following her own experience of it through her drawings and figurative glass. *"Our society is so caught up in ignoring aging, trying to reverse it. I want to focus on understanding what it is, embracing it through my art."*

Nicholson is impatient with the notion that once you reach a certain point in life, you stop growing/changing. *"In my observations, people who never exceed their*

reach are not happy people. Being engaged, having fun, risking new challenges is why we're here. When I am making art that is meaningful to me, everything else – time, comfort, the environment outside – is superfluous. I am completely immersed in my work. That wonderful meditation gives purpose to life.

"I want to be a happy old person, comfortable in my body, gray hair, wrinkles and all." As part of that, the artist intends to keep niggling her way toward meaningful explorations in her art for as long as her body and mind allow. And her work will give the rest of us the privilege of tracing her journey and her realizations.

Nancy Nicholson's Website

www.nancynicholson.com

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