

Oliver Leško – the Hidden Dynamic of Optical Glass

One of the most important factors in the formation of Slovak glass art in its own right within the Czechoslovak context was the founding of the Department of Glass Art at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. In 1965, the Czech artist Václav Cigler was appointed as its head. His unorthodox approach towards glass accentuated an imperative to strip it of its decorative nature, something which also formed part of his activity as a pedagogue and lecturer.

Czechoslovak glass art of this era was ranked as part of the larger category of applied arts, as a result of which its ideological purity was less strictly monitored than was the case with the fine arts. Václav Cigler was thus able to embark on bolder experiment, drawing on conceptual art and minimalism and expressing himself in the spirit of geometrical abstraction. His works often had a meditative character, oriented towards an analysis of their own relationship to the surrounding environment. Cigler's art was an influence not only on the graduates of his studio, but also strongly marked the coming decades, for instance in its emphasis on geometry and visual language. Still, it can be said that Cigler's great influence has ultimately become an obstacle in the further quest for individual expression within Slovak glass. Immaculately executed objects featuring the optical play of lentil-shaped incisions are nothing but a reiteration of the decorative craftsmanship which the founder of the school stood against.

Among one of the first graduates of Cigler's studio was Juraj Gavula (b. 1942), who would later lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, and after 1989 become head of the Department of Glass Art. In his own work, he preferred the medium of stone, and in terms of instruction other materials besides glass also began to be used to a much greater degree. The 1990s were a period of fundamental social changes, including the disintegration of Czechoslovakia. Two independent countries emerged in early 1993 – the Czech and Slovak Republics. The number of national exhibitions dropped accordingly, and alongside Czech artists, Slovak artists soon began to assert themselves among collectors in Western Europe and the United States.

It was at this time that Oliver Leško embarked on the study of visual arts. He first enrolled in the Department of Ceramics at the Secondary School of Applied Arts in Bratislava. Already here, the studio of stone carving and the language of sculpture in general exerted a strong influence on him. At a later stage, however, his skill at working with clay, including three-dimensional modelling, working with the potter's wheel and making his own plaster casts, would come in useful. In the years 1993 – 1999 he was a student at the Department of Glass Art at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, also studying under docent Juraj Glavula. The latter's supervision was not limiting in nature, but instead allowed him even during his school years to gradually define his own artistic principles and vision. In the spirit of the dominant tendencies of the day, he combined various media, creating kinetic objects which fused together three elements: movement, light and sound. He also applied this concept in his final diploma work – an installation in a conservatory.

Oliver Leško is one of a handful of younger graduates who pursue glass work as an independent art form. While the economic situation and the demanding nature of glass-making technologies drove others to abandon the field, Leško has been gradually equipping and fitting his own workshop. Ever since childhood, his role model in terms of work ethic has been his father – the architect, draughtsman and cartoonist, as well as the author of a number of animated films featuring his own clay figures. Since his youth, Leško has also been inspired by aquariums – within the geometrical confines of their form, there exists ceaseless movement. This principle of change and dynamism within a simple form has become one of the central motifs of his work to date. Already during his studies he focused on exploiting the optical qualities of glass, creating cut-glass objects of simple, geometric forms – for example, cubic forms with cut lentil shapes whose number was then multiplied through the illusion of mirror reflections. A revelation to Oliver Leško was the process of kiln-casting technique, where pieces of glass rods are fused in a mould, as a result forming an irregular texture within the cut-glass object.

He began to experiment with this technique as early as 1996, but due to the demanding nature of its realization the first object was not finished until 1997. In the cycle *Harmony*, consisting of clear glass of prismatic shapes, the kiln-casting element represents a fascinating detail in the inner space of the sculpture. In the same year, he finished *Icy Pyramid*, where the entire inner mass was now formed by four-sided kiln-cast segments of sections of glass rods. A similar atmosphere and inspiration from wintry moods can be found in sculptures created the following year, entitled *Winter*, *Icy Eye* and *White Eye*, presented at group exhibitions of Slovak glass in London and Frederigsberg (Denmark) in 1998. Clear molten glass was also the material of choice for his later spire-shaped sculptures, in which the artist assembles the prismatic elements in such a way that the inner structure alternates horizontal and vertical compositions.

Oliver Leššo has elaborated this technique over the years by working with tinted molten glass and more complex forms of varying depth. Each element of the quadrilateral glass rod is first sand blasted to a particular grain, and then placed symmetrically within the mould in such a way that the prisms touch. Casting disrupts their regularity, the surfaces of contact becoming opaque as a result. Seen from the front, in the final cut and polished object these combine to create a net-like pattern. This grows more dense and minute either towards the centre or towards the edges of the sculpture. Similarly, the transparency and colour intensity changes depending on the thickness of the molten glass, from pellucid tones to dark and almost non-transparent hues. This principle is embodied by *Secret Structure – Blue* which received a prize at the leading exhibition *European Glass Context*. This exhibition took place in the fall of 2012 on the Danish island of Bornholm, and Oliver Leššo was awarded the main prize in the category *Established Artist*.

While *Secret Structure – Blue*, a sculpture of square base with a circular incision almost magically concentrates and emanates light, his other work on display in Denmark, *Lake-Blue Eye* captivates through its use of other visual devices – accentuating the dynamic mutability of the form itself. This work is also representative of another, and no less important

tendency in Leššo's work, inspired by semi-figural motifs. The artist here works with immaculately polished, subtly curved radiuses of concave and convex shapes, semi-spheres, etc. The basis is clear molten glass, with colour elements inserted and arranged in a linear, graphic pattern. These works are executed as series, revisiting identical forms which differ in their inner solution and their often almost mysterious impact. Endless reflections metamorphose in pulsating lines. Depending on perspective, colour may appear to almost vanish, giving way to an ethereal inner space. Titles such as *Blue Springs* or *Blue Tear* attest to lyrical and poetic inspiration. Sometimes, pairs of sculptures represent opposing meanings, such as *Day – Night*, etc., their atmosphere changing with the light conditions of their surroundings – depending on the colour and intensity of the light.

The artist exploits the principle of internal structure as both an optical and kinetic device, as by moving around the object the viewers can themselves determine what they see inside the outward form. The kinetic principle is perhaps most pronounced in pyramidal forms, or truncated pyramid. One of the last works from the *Pyramids* cycle is a sculpture featuring a small pyramid in a spectrum of red hues inside it. Its contours proportionately repeat the outline of the outer pyramid, accentuating the red colour locked within a seemingly non-material space. This sort of reduced colour range also appears in sculptures where Leššo works with mirrored or metallic surfaces which bar the penetration of light, further enhancing kinetic effects. On the other hand, the use of a so-called diachronic filter allows him to set into motion the colour mutability of the spectrum of light. Another fascinating aspect are Leššo's experiments with the refraction of light depending on whether the surface is matte or polished.

In terms of technique, Leššo's series may be based on up to three separately moulded and melted elements. The preparation of moulds, mould casting and mould fusing, and the ensuing hand-cutting operations, as well as final polishing, are conducted by the artist himself, with an astonishing degree of precision. This is not only extremely time-consuming, but also requires a great deal of technical prowess, practical experience and state-of-the art equipment. The artist controls

the result of the efforts by measurements made throughout the process with the help of prismatic rulers, since an immaculately even surface is important for achieving the best possible optical qualities. It is hardly surprising then that some sculptures have been elaborated over a period of several years, with the artist revisiting them throughout.

In his work so far, in the medium of moulded, melted and cut glass glass sculpture, the artist has programmatically opted for simple, clear forms, rejecting any more complex modelling such as can be seen for instance in the Czech school of glass sculpture. He concentrates fully on the rendering of internal space, and therefore does not seek any more complex contours which would compete with that, distracting viewers' attention. Oliver Leššo's oeuvre is compelling evidence of the fact that he has managed to forge a style of his own, developing the tradition of Slovak optical cut glass, synonymous with technical perfection, purity of geometric form and optical effect. At the same time, he has managed to transcend a certain coolness and sterility associated with this school by incorporating inner structures within his works – either irregular organic shapes, or purely geometric ones. These define the virtual inner space of the sculpture. Neither does he eschew the contrasts of matte and transparent surfaces, or combinations of clear and tinted. All of these devices endow his minimalist sculptures with a peculiar emotionality, accentuating the tension between geometric form and the constantly metamorphosing dynamic of the space within.

Pavla Rossini

Pavla Rossini, born Drdáčká is PhD in aesthetics, working as an independent curator and art critic in Copenhagen and Prague

Born

April 20th 1973 in Bratislava, Slovakia

Education

1987 – 1991 Secondary School of Applied Arts in Bratislava

1993 – 1999 Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava

Awards

1997 Volkswagen Design: "Die New Beatle - Vase", Wolfsburg (G)

2012 European Glass Context: category "Established Artist", Bornholm (DK)

Represented

Victoria & Albert Museum, Ersting Stiftung, Gallery Groll, Aleksandrowicz Collection, Gallery Nova

Exhibitions

Participated in about 60 group exhibitions in Europe (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Austria, Italy, France, Holland, England, Germany, Denmark) and USA (New York, Chicago). Since 1997 he has hold 20 solo exhibitions among others at Slovak National Museum in Bratislava, Gallery Nova (Bratislava), Slovak Institute (Wien, Roma), Gallery Groll (Naarden), Etienne & van Den Doel Gallery (Haag), Etienne Gallery (Österwijk), JCC Gallery (Luxembourg), Plateaux Gallery (London), Oscar Wilde Museum (Dublin).