Bertil Vallien

The Lifetime Achievement Award is the highest honor presented by the Glass Art Society. Accomplished designer, sculptor, ceramist and glass artist Bertil Vallien has been selected to receive the award in 2012.

Vallien is most noted for his pioneering use of the sand-casting technique. Originally used in industry for casting metal amongst other materials, Vallien developed it for use with glass in a studio setting and continues to explore its seemingly inexhaustible possibilities today. It is no exaggeration that Vallien 'has done more to push the art of sand-cast glass than any other artist in the world.' (Stunda, 2004, p. 69)

You started out with ceramics at Konstfack in Stockholm? Tell me about your journey to glass.
"I started art school really early, when I was 17. I didn't really know what medium to choose, so I went for the ceramics department which at that time included a very minor glass education. I had Stig Lindberg there as a teacher. He was very inspiring. I couldn't really decide what direction to go in –either to become a designer for the glass or ceramic industry or independent artist. I really enjoyed that school but after Konstfack I went to Los Angeles, CA and spent two years there working for a small ceramic company called Hal Fromholt Ceramics. (I also attended the University of Southern California for a time because I was sponsored by the Swedish American Foundation.) I enjoyed working for the small company even though I was the lowest rank. Eventually I started to design things for them that became enormously successful and was given a studio to work in a few days a week."

"Those years in America were really important to me and at that time there was a revolution happening in crafts thanks to Peter Voulkos and Harvey Littleton. It was certainly a very big difference from the very beautiful, functional, Scandinavian style that I had been working with and that my education was based upon. I had two shows in the US during those two years."

"Actually, my first show was next door to Andy Warhol, it was the first time he showed the Campbell's soup works! Anyhow I met many interesting people and started to work outside of the Scandinavian boundaries during that time. When I came back to Sweden, I got a job at the glass factory Boda, mainly as a commercial designer. So that was my first real job. There was a very famous artist/designer working at Boda at that time who felt that there was not enough room for me so they moved me to a small factory, only 15 minutes away called Åfors. Åfors was managed by a rich man who owned many glass factories but, his style was out of fashion so I got a lot of freedom. I started designing lines for production and that went really well."

"My dream was to work six months with glass and then for the rest of the year to work in my own sculpture studio. That worked for many years but glass kind of caught me and I thought there must be a way to use this material for more personal work. So I started to experiment with all kinds of mould materials. I'm a builder. I like to build. I like to use my hands. I started to use sand. I think I was actually the first person to use sand as a mould material in glass After a lot of experimentation, I found the right sand and started to mold my sculptures. That started to take up most of my time so since then glass has been my main material."

Can you sum up how your work has developed over the years? I know it's a big question!
"I work on themes which are often inspired by something I read. Like, a girl from this neighborhood, Karolina Olsson, which is kind of a myth here but is a true story. She was only 13 years of age when, coming home to the island where she lived, she slipped on the icecovered

sea, fell asleep and slept for thirty-two years. That is how the head series and portraits started. That series actually inspired an opera that is opening in June of this year. The name of it is 'The Sleeping Girl'. I was actually offered to do the scenography but I turned it down."

"I like fantasies and stories and the boat of course is a wonderful archetype that everybody can actually relate to. This hull that is the only thing that protects what is inside from the lethal waters. The boat shape has been used a lot of course, not only for essential travels but also to other pastures, other lives. So, the boat has been a very strong influence to me especially as we had a son that actually drowned very young."

"To me, glass is about two catastrophes: the hot volcano that you gather glass from and then the transition of going from the hot lava material to the opposite, to ice. That is something that has always fascinated me. So I have been and still work with this dreamed up zone between devastating coldness and lethal heat that gave inspiration to the series Area II. I'm also a little bit inspired by Tchaikovsky's films. Overall, I am dependent on a theme when I work and I stick to those themes for a year of two and eventually come back to them."

What are you working on at the moment?
"I've been doing a lot of commissions especially for churches which I think has to do with my religious upbringing. I'm not religious myself, but I was brought up in a very religious home – almost fundamentalist."

What do your future plans hold?
"I have a residency coming up at the Tacoma Museum of Glass in Washington. I also have a really important show coming up in Venice which will coincide with the Venice Biennale this August. I have a full Palazzo for myself! I'm really excited for that. It's going to be a retrospective exhibition and I will teach a workshop on Murano in conjunction with this exhibition. There are big changes happening here at the factory and I will lose my studio so I haven't actually scheduled any big projects for next year. It's going to be a year of thinking and organizing."

Vallien is most noted for his monumental forms. Among them; heads, boats, monoliths, cruciforms and thin glass slabs. A spiritual undercurrent is evident throughout due to the symbols of crosses, circles, staircases, human figures, and hearts, among others. Themes of travel and journey are also present in this work. They are about, as Vallien puts it, "dreams of an eternal life."

Vallien's illustrious career has been recognized by numerous awards, such as The Visionaries Award 2001 from American Craft Museum, an honorary doctorate from the University of Växjö, Sweden in 2002 and the Libenski Award in 2008. The Glass Art Society is delighted to present the Lifetime Achievement Award to Bertil Vallien during the 2012 Annual Conference in Toledo, Ohio. Considering his prolific research and invaluable contribution to the worldwide glass community, this promises to be a fascinating lecture.

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*'Aspen Colorado', Bertil Vallien Duval Smart Gallery *Sculpture (Washington, D.C.)* v. 23 no. 8 (October 2004) p. 69-70

opens August 27th.