REVIEW

# BERTIL VALLIEN

MARX-SAUNDERS GALLERY
CHICAGO, IL
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BOTH BERTIL VALLIEN SCULPTURES, 2005, ARE SAND-CAST GLASS. ABOVE: *JANUS (MAP),* 8 5/8 BY 10 5/8 BY 5 1/8 INCHES. OPPOSITE PAGE: *SHADOW,* 19 3/4 BY 11 1/4 BY 7 1/2 INCHES. PHOTOS/JO-NELL KOELSCH.

Bertil Vallien's glass sculptures echo an icy, hyperborean world of black lichened forests and candescent claustrophobic light. They are rooted in archaic northern sources. Their themes reach back to ninth-century Scandinavian myths, chanted skaldic sagas such as *The Poetic Edda,* which chronicles the creation and the ultimate destruction of the world.

"The sun turns black, earth sinks in the sea, / The hot stars down from heaven are whirled," recites the bard in the *Edda*'s cataclysmic first poem, "Voluspo." These epic chords reverberate in the psychic and material depths of Vallien's glass. To peer into the Swedish artist's silvered, celestial, timeless world is to gaze downward through the impenetrable, clouded surface of a frozen lake, while being aware of the turning arc of a pale sky above. Vallien's art calls forth a peculiar, nocturnal sorrow; its suspended, gelid interiors convey both immensity and occlusion. This work investigates the realm of dreams and nightmares; it incarnates what the Norwegian novelist and poet Tarjei Vesaas once called the "unknown sea inside a dream."

Over the last 40 years, Vallien, who works from a Kosta Boda-affiliated glassworks in Afors, Sweden, pioneered the development of the technique of sand-casting for glass sculpture, producing masterly, iconic forms that depict luminous depth—a sharp contrast to the reflective, shiny surfaces typical of glass. This exhibition, titled "Odyssey," reaffirmed the artist's most famous statement, "Glass eats light," which has followed him around the world and still sums up best the deep, pellucid glow trapped in the interior of his sculptures. *Gone-05,* 2005, for example, radiates a transcendent cobalt blue, and takes the form of an upended longboat on a plinth, signifying Vallien's continuing preoccupation with the imagery of physical and metaphorical journeys and with the legacy of his Scandinavian background.

Not surprisingly, then, to look at a work by Vallien means to engage in a search, to navigate through a sand- and oxide-encrusted glass surface punctuated by bright peepholes opening into a strange, inward landscape. Putting one's eye up close to the work forces prolonged examination and, in the process, raises a pernicious doubt: can looking hard lead to sight, insight or even understanding? Vallien's art retains inscrutability; it is striking for its sense of silence.

Vallien has often made work in series (using houses, crosses, bridges, hanging staves, runic monoliths, heads and torsos as imagery), and his best known motif has been the boat, with its existential associations with voyages, danger and death. But this exhibition reaffirmed Vallien's eminence as a figurative sculptor of human form. Both primitive and exalted, these archaic heads and static, frontal torsos keenly reflect a duality at the core of the artist's sculpture—a tension between his quest for fundamental, archetypal forms and the inevitable sweep of time and decay in the natural world of the body.

In *Janus (Map),* 2005, for example, a homuncular face striated with map lines hangs from the back of an elegantly scumbled, argentine head—perhaps to suggest that the "map" of one's being can often be found in one's face. Other *Janus* heads also emphasize the double sidedness and ambiguity at the core of human identity: they include faces flickering inside faces, a "reality" entombed behind a glassy outer facade. A chill pervades these forms: their light-filled, tightly closed interior selves perversely hint at the magnitude of a void. Like his bardic predecessors, Bertil Vallien has traced a song of lamentation beneath the surface of his art. Here, death and beauty reside hand in hand.

—POLLY ULLRICH

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