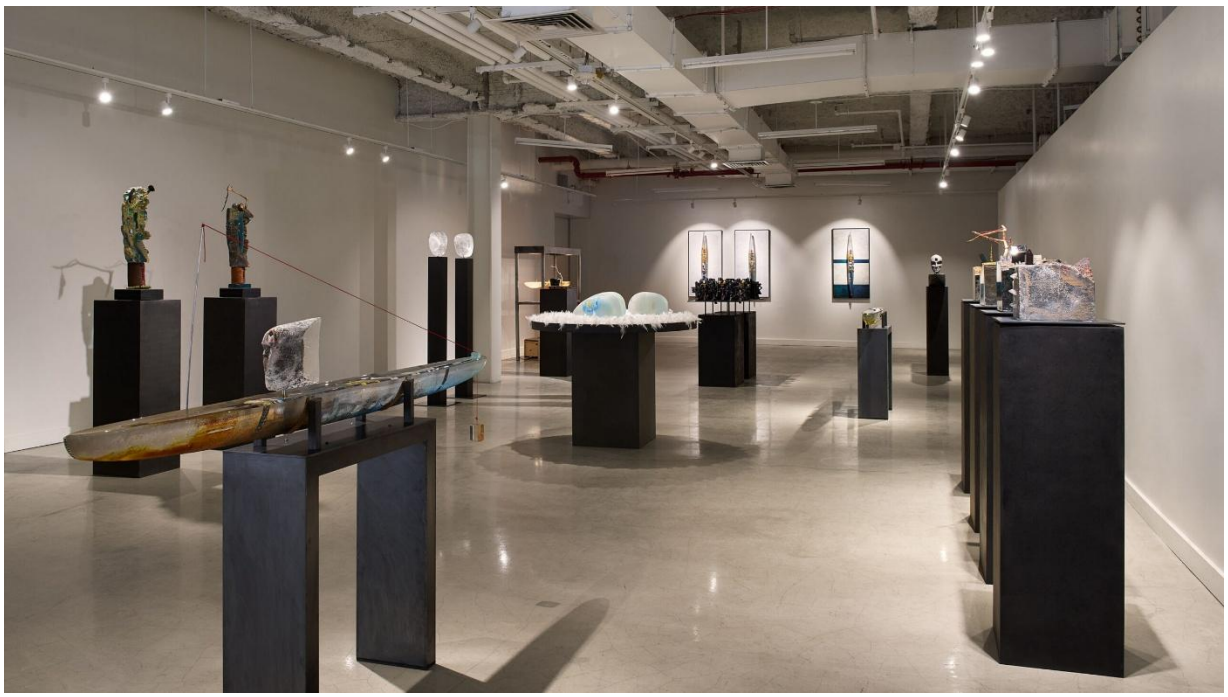
sculpture
A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE CENTER



Bertil Vallien, installation view of “Starman,” 2026. Photo: Hanna Grankvist

Bertil Vallien

May 29, 2026 by Fred Voon

New York

UrbanGlass

Among the glass sculptures in Bertil Vallien’s “Starman” (on view through June 7, 2026), ghostly faces lurk in every corner: lodged in the hulls of boats, slumped on a bed of white feathers, carved onto a parade of dark totemic warriors. Occasionally, an extra visage emerges in a startling internal reflection. These abstract masks and their neutral expressions—a couple are devoid of features entirely—are blank screens for personal projections. Depending on one’s state of mind, they could feel calm or sorrowful or haunting. They could spark recollections of a loved one or inspire contemplation of oneself.

Since the 1960s, Vallien has maintained a dual practice at the Swedish glass company Kosta Boda, donning a different colored beret in each mode: gray for his industrial designs and red for his artistic explorations. In the ’80s, he pioneered a form of sand casting based on the ancient metalworking technique. This method, which involves pouring molten glass into a compacted sand mold, produced most of the pieces in “Starman.”

The mystique of Vallien’s masks thickens when he plunges them into the depths of history or mythology. His “Janus” series presents a face within a face. As one face propels forward, seemingly blasted by sand and grit (actually the result of contact with the mold), the back of its head is cleaved into the clear blade of an ax, revealing a second, painted face within, which

gazes backward. Janus is the two-faced Roman god of transitions and beginnings—that's why the first month of the year is called January. One side stares into the past, the other into the future. Vallien's sculptures add another dimension. Viewed from certain angles, the past-face in *Janus Grande I* (2020) doubles in reflection within the ax blade, suggesting that while the drive toward the future is singular, the accumulated past gets cluttered and complicated.

The exhibition culminates in a grand display of glass ships up to 6.5 feet long. Each is embedded with curious, colorful objects, anchored in the center by yet another impenetrable mask. Given Vallien's heritage, the sculptures evoke the epic voyages of Norse longships and the splendor of Viking ship burials in which a person of high status would be laid in a vessel, surrounded by prized possessions to ensure a pleasant passage to the afterlife.

In *The Master*, a 2025 documentary about Vallien directed by Staffan Bengtsson, we see how glassmaking requires the effort of the whole studio, particularly for bigger pieces like the longships. As some artists ladle glass from the furnace into the sand mold, others come in with shears to stem the molten flow, and yet others escort the "inclusions"—prepared, painted pieces of glass, wood, stone, and metal that Vallien gingerly positions with tongs or tweezers before the glass sets.

Vallien's fascination with ships began, near the start of his career, as a way to mourn his toddler son's untimely death by drowning. Over time, the meanings of his sculptures have multiplied, their scale grown existential. "The very thin skin of the boat is the only thing that protects you from danger," Vallien has said. And yet, in his pieces, this membrane separating life from death seems to have dissolved. The glass body of each ship is filled with bubbles (created by graphite that vaporizes during casting), as if the ocean and its infinite vicissitudes have rushed in, the vessel and the sea becoming one. The rune-like artifacts (a turtle, a ladder, a rock painting) are wishes and memories accompanying the journey of life, and the ghostly traveler aboard—that could be any one of us, every one of us.